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1. GOAL

The goal of the Flint Uptown Reinvestment Strategy is to redefine Flint’s central business district (CBD) in order to transform it into one of the best small-city downtowns in the United States. Although this is an aggressive goal given the current state of the downtown, there is a great opportunity to redefine downtown in accordance with the realities of the emerging economic and social conditions of Flint and southeastern Michigan as the 21st century begins.

The automobile economy that made Flint a prosperous city through the 1960s has changed and the city now requires a more diversified, broad-based economy. Downtown Flint needs to reflect the changing economic conditions and profile of the city, while also being a symbol and emblem of a city that is being redefined and reinvented to reflect the opportunities and circumstances of a new era and time. Downtown Flint in the 21st century can be a vibrant, mixed-use urban district comprised of existing uses such as financial services, churches and religious institutions, professional offices, and the University of Michigan-Flint, in addition to arts and cultural facilities, cafés and nightclubs, convenience and specialty retail (including clothing boutiques and bookstores), incubator office/R&D space, loft apartments, hotels and lodging and new residential neighborhoods, and civic-quality parks, plazas and riverfront open spaces.

Flint’s downtown should be a pedestrian-friendly urban environment that is exciting, vibrant, safe, convenient, diverse and emblematic of the future rather than a symbol of the past. Downtown should be a source of pride for residents and serve the needs of a prosperous and evolving neighborhood, city and metropolitan region.
The basic premise of the Flint Uptown Reinvestment Strategy is that many small, locally-based initiatives and decisions will, over time, result in sustainable and significant improvements for downtown without the need for massive, single-project developments that may overwhelm and replace a functional urban district.

The Flint Uptown Reinvestment Strategy (“Initiatives for Uptown”) identifies the specific actions and projects that can be accomplished individually, while collectively contributing to an implementation framework for the regeneration of downtown Flint.
2. MARKET OPPORTUNITIES FOR UPTOWN

The principal economic and market challenges facing downtown Flint are not unique. The powerful forces of population loss, suburban mall culture, big box retail, and sprawl have, for the last generation, redefined industrial-based urban centers throughout the United States. But while the root causes of urban decline are not necessarily confined to the city, the remedy must be specific to Flint.

The Initiatives for Uptown strategy is built on the attainment of short-term goals that are grounded in market realities and driven by Flint-based entrepreneurs. This is not an all-or-nothing “silver-bullet” approach, but rather a phased, realistic reinvestment strategy. For the strategy to take hold in a meaningful way, it must have roots in the singular assets of Flint and its people.

A key component of the reinvestment strategy is the size and character of the customer base within a Primary and Secondary Market Area. The Flint Primary Market Area (Primary Market Area) has been defined as a two-mile radius of downtown, an area with a population of approximately 55,000 people. The Flint Secondary Market Area (Secondary Market Area) is defined as a 20-mile radius around downtown—a reasonable driving distance to downtown—with a population of 550,000.

Like many urban centers in the industrial heartland of the United States, Flint has grappled with population loss. Since the 1960s, the city’s population has dropped from nearly 200,000 to less than 125,000, according to the 2000 census. The causes of this exodus are complex and varied, social and economic, but the results of the population loss are clear. Vacancy rates have increased and retail spending has declined as residents have moved out of the urban core and into the suburbs—or away from the area altogether.

Potential investors in a downtown area can be motivated by any number of factors, including profit, community development or civic pride. Regardless of the reason, a rational investor will want to create development that is at least self-sustaining. For potential investors downtown, a key question is: Who exactly is living in and around downtown? Investors need to understand whether a ready market exists for their products, who their customers will be, and what the tastes of these customers are.

**Definition of Primary Market Area**

The Primary Market Area is a two-mile radius from the city’s urban core. This area includes University of Michigan-Flint, city and county offices and courts, the Flint Cultural Center, the Carriage Town District, University Park Estates and numerous other signature sites in Flint. These residents represent a significant asset for downtown and a promising market for downtown programming. These individuals, for all intents and purposes, are among Flint’s downtown residents.

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**Definition of the Secondary Market Area**

The Secondary Market Area is defined as a twenty-mile radius around the downtown, which is considered a reasonable driving distance to retail destinations in and

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1For the purposes of this study, the center point of the radius is the intersection of 2nd Street and Saginaw Street.
around downtown. The population of the Secondary Market is approximately 550,000 and is more diverse, affluent and older than that within the Primary Market.

Within the Primary and Secondary Market Areas, the following Flint-specific consumer group profiles have been identified as having the potential to contribute to the reinvestment of Uptown:

1. **Newly-formed Households**: Relatively younger, with most individuals between the ages of 20 and 34, this consumer group is typified by single-parent, single-person, and shared households. These households are moderate-income, and employment is largely centered around the manufacturing and service sectors.

2. **Twentysomethings**: The twentysomething population is mobile and in transition, completing college or starting a career. The majority of twentysomethings—twice the national average—live in single-person or shared households. Median household income is the highest of any of the Primary Market Area’s five major categories, and the population has a comparatively high disposable income. The twentysomething population generally lives in rental apartments.

3. **Older, Settled Married Couples**: The older, settled married-couple consumer segment is comprised of a population that is slightly older than the national average (median age of 37 years old), and many households include schoolchildren or adult children living with parents. One-fifth of this consumer segment is receiving retirement income. In terms of home price points, net worth and median income, the older, settled married-couple group ranks significantly above national averages.

4. **Semi-rural Lifestyle**: Semi-rural lifestyle consumers are generally married and between 35 and 54 years old, with a minority having school-age children living at home. The median age is slightly above the national average. This population is relatively affluent and lives in newly-constructed homes. Much of the semi-rural lifestyle household’s disposable income is spent at home on improvements and home projects.

5. **Middle America**: Middle America consumers are usually married, and earn an income slightly above the U.S. average, with few individuals below the poverty line. Households are usually non-farm but rural, with a disproportionately large number of mobile-home dwellers. Many individuals are involved in manufacturing work.

### Comparison of Primary Trade and Secondary Market Area

<table>
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<th>FPMA</th>
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<td>Median Household Income</td>
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What these comparisons make clear is that the population living outside the Primary Market Area has far greater disposable income than those living in and around downtown. A fundamental goal of the reinvestment strategy for downtown will be to attract some of that wealth into the Primary Market Area. The existing Primary
Market Area population, with a median income of $31,000, simply does not have sufficient resources to catalyze a rebirth of Flint’s downtown on its own. Yet, while the reinvestment strategy should target drawing wealth from the Secondary Market Area, it will be important throughout the reinvestment process to integrate current Primary Market Area residents and businesses. Too often, existing downtown residents are forgotten amid the flurry of plans and programs to attract new wealth into the heart of a city.

**Uptown Reinvestment Strategy Development Program**

Based upon extensive market analyses and consideration of the primary and secondary market potential, the following residential, retail and office development program has been identified for Uptown. The reinvestment strategy is based upon attracting a growing share of the following:

- Younger: Single, childless couples, college students
- Older: Empty-nesters, retired and elderly
- More affluent and educated suburban residents seeking an urban lifestyle

The recently completed “Cool Cities” study determined that new residents in growing downtowns have specific consumer tastes, such as:

- Residential Living: Loft apartments, restored homes, historic neighborhoods, mix of rental and ownership, and higher densities.
- Dining: Preference for ethnic diversity, higher quality, distinctive features, and within walking distance of homes and employment.
- Shopping: Distinctive, unique, up-market, and in close proximity to homes and employment.
- Entertainment: Close proximity to a diversity of galleries, theaters, music, arts, and cultural venues.

Successful public open spaces promote civic pride and increase the value of adjacent properties.

Great streets are attractive for both pedestrians and drivers.
Downtown Living Options

National newspaper headlines like “U.S. Cities Buck Trend With Boom Downtown”\(^2\) and “Downtowns Make Cities Winners,”\(^3\) have served notice that a trend of downtown living has taken root in dozens of American cities. Citing new census data, journalists were quick to praise activist city efforts to draw residents downtown. Many articles noted that those individuals moving into downtowns in the 1990s included many groups that had traditionally settled in the suburbs.

While many downtowns have grown at a faster rate than city populations as a whole, the newspaper headlines simplify the story. The growth in downtowns in the 1990s often lagged behind the growth in suburban populations, and there were demographic factors at work beyond the control of planners and city governments. These factors included:

- Emerging high-tech companies and their young workers who preferred edgier urban locales to suburban blandness.
- A booming segment of empty nesters who created a larger market of childless, and affluent, people seeking to leave large suburban homes.

Still, even with these qualifiers, it is undeniable that after decades of flight from center cities, a return to downtown living has occurred, and there are approaches that have proved effective across the nation.

A survey of 24 medium and large American cities by the Brookings Institute\(^4\) revealed that growth in downtown population either comprised a disproportionate level of the city’s overall population growth, or mitigated an overall loss in city population. This trend is evidenced in Flint. While Flint experienced a loss in its downtown

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\(^{1}\) USA Today, 6/19/2001
\(^{2}\) USA Today, 6/2001
One of the central conclusions of the Brookings Institute survey is that the character of the growing downtown populations, according to 2000 census data, is distinct from the greater city as a whole. The report states that:

Downtowners are more affluent, more highly educated, and more white than the city dwellers overall but more diverse than those in the MSA...Singles, empty nesters, gays, childless or small households, and [students and the elderly] are more highly represented in [growing] downtowns.

Potential Downtown Residents in Flint

The above description indicates that there is a number of population segments living in the Secondary Market Area who are well suited to urban living. These include:

- Newly Formed Households
- Young Frequent Movers
- Enterprising Young Singles
- Upper-income Empty Nesters
- Active Senior Singles
- Urban Professional Couples
- Twentysomethings

The chart below illustrates the comparative population sizes of these consumer categories. In all, these categories comprise over 120,000 people in the Secondary Market Area, excluding the two-mile radius around the urban core.

Offering downtown living options to these population segments has been a cornerstone of the successful efforts to revitalize the hearts of cities in the 1990s. Particularly for private downtown groups in these cities—akin to the

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5The Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) here is used to define the city. MSA designation is a Bureau of the Census measure of an urban area.

6“Found Land,” as defined by the Brookings Institute, is a piece of land that was previously unavailable, or ignored, by a municipality due to issues of third-party ownership or environmental degradation.

7HOPE VI is a program under the auspices of the Department of Housing and Urban Development that seeks to improve the residential circumstances of public housing residents by integrating these residents into the greater fabric of a municipality. This is usually accomplished by moving residents from isolated and decrepit public housing facilities into a mixed-income residential environment.
Uptown Reinvestment Corporation (URC)—attracting and maintaining residents in downtown areas has remained the central component of their plans. Private downtown groups in cities that have been successful in attracting population downtown have stressed the following elements to their efforts to build housing and attract new residents:

- Enhanced safety and security
- Creating a 24-hour downtown environment
- Pro-housing marketing campaigns

Efforts to convert vacant downtown spaces to housing has a positive impact on the commercial market in downtowns. Not only do additional residents support commercial options, but the vacancy rate (and the negative perception it promotes) for office and retail space drops as empty buildings are converted to residential use.

Two other important downtown residential market segments include:

- Senior Housing: For years, the Court Street Village Apartments in Flint faced little competition in attracting residents to its senior complex. In recent years, however, this has changed. Several operators of senior facilities in and around Flint indicated that the market has become saturated and offers little opportunity for new development in the near term. There is also interest from the downtown churches in participating in or developing downtown senior living facilities for their members, many of whom live in the suburbs and would like to be in a more urban location.

- Student Housing: Student housing has been a staple of many successful downtown comebacks. In January 2002, the University of Michigan Flint commissioned a feasibility study to examine the possibility of constructing student housing near the campus.

**Downtown Office Market**

According to developers and brokers, the downtown office market is relatively weak, with government tenants providing the most significant cluster of office activity along the Saginaw Street strip. The Plaza One complex, constructed in 1991 to attract Class A tenants downtown, has been a modest success, attracting such prominent local employers as Bank One, BKR Dupuis & Ryden, SSOE, Inc., and the law firm of Plunkett and Clooney.

Generally, there has been an exodus of office tenants to suburban Flint, allowing employees to reside closer to their workplaces and firms to “build-to-suit” for their specific needs. The vacancy rate for office space in the downtown area is estimated at approximately 25% – 35%. By contrast, the vacancy rate for office space in suburban Flint is closer to 5% – 10%. Local realtors are not optimistic about drawing additional tenants downtown in the near term, citing security concerns, parking issues, and a general lack of vitality.

Realtors and businesses generally expressed the sentiment that the office market downtown would revive only when the area attracted increased pedestrian traffic, food options, and character. At the present time, it is very difficult to lure office tenants from the suburban environment.

**Downtown Retail Market**

The success of downtown retail programming is closely linked to downtown housing development. The classic dilemma applies to Flint: People won’t move downtown without retail options, but retail developers won’t invest without a critical mass of downtown residents.

There are two types of retail potential for Uptown:

- Destination Retail: Destination retail businesses are those that generate a special purpose trip and that do not necessarily benefit from a high-volume pedestrian location. A destination retail location often has a theme, such as a high-end shopping district, an arts district, or an entertainment/recreation identity.
• Convenience Retail: Convenience retail businesses are those that attract pedestrians and shoppers within close proximity to the establishment. Convenience retail establishments will stock consumer staples, such as groceries and take-out food, that appeal to residents and office workers within a short distance.

Creating a cluster of successful retail establishments can be a difficult process. While the nature of different retail clusters varies in downtowns throughout the nation, there are several prevailing characteristics among successful developments:

• Retail must be linked to the tastes of the target audience; control over the character of retail is key to a successful cluster.

• Retail establishments stand a greater chance of success when surrounded by other establishments that target the same audience.

• Investing in local entrepreneurs, rather than chain establishments, can offer a number of advantages, such as retaining locally-based customers and the ability to customize goods and services to a specific demographic and customer preference.

• Reducing the risk to investors through incentives can make the difference between success and failure.

• Patience on the part of investors and stakeholders is a key element (and not an attribute typical of a national chain or franchise).

• A dedicated staff person can provide invaluable guidance to downtown retail start-ups.

As it exists, the current population in the Primary Market Area is not sufficient to support the expansion of extensive retail, dining and entertainment options. Spending levels in the Primary Market Area are capable of supporting five modest bookstores, two small movie theaters, eleven modest grocery stores, and five modest restaurants. These estimates are based on national standards for sales per square foot in selected retail categories and the specific spending of consumers living in Flint’s Primary Market Area. While not insignificant by any means, much of the demand for these establishments has already been accounted for along Miller Road and in the various malls in and around Flint.

In spite of formidable market challenges, downtown does continue to attract a broad cross-section of the Flint community and support a number of viable businesses from Metropolis to Citizen’s Bank to the Bailiwick Pub. These establishments have carved out niches for themselves, even as others have faltered. Through research and interviews, HR&A examined why these Primary Market Area businesses have been sustainable, given the loss of the downtown population and the low level of Primary Market Area consumer spending.
• First, the owners and managers of many downtown Flint locations have voiced a strong commitment to the downtown Flint area. While market opportunities outside the city center have presented themselves, businesses in the Primary Market Area have remained in the heart of the city. In interviews with these proprietors, business owners consistently said that they believed in locating operations downtown, even as competitors pursued more lucrative options in suburban Flint. This is an important dynamic. It demonstrates the value of supporting local, home-grown entrepreneurs as opposed to regional or national chains that are far more likely to pull out of an area when confronted with an economic downturn.

• Second, downtown offers a competitive advantage to niche businesses targeting a select audience. Bank One, for example, benefits from its proximity to the strip of government buildings along Saginaw Street. Youth and urban-oriented establishments such as Metropolis and the Buckham Alley Theater attract customers who value a different environment from a suburban mall.

• Third, niche businesses have grown around new populations. The Carriage Town neighborhood has emerged as a diverse and vibrant urban neighborhood, particularly over the past decade. Historic renovated homes are selling for up to $100,000 and, as stated previously, are being absorbed quickly, according to local real estate brokers. Some entrepreneurs have been quick to capitalize on this growing market of homeowners, most of whom bring with them above-average disposable incomes. The Good Beans Café, Pasta Mama’s and Randolph House Antiques are three establishments that have all tailored their products and their marketing to appeal to the diverse audience at Carriage Town. Other establishments, including a recently closed apparel store, failed because they did not offer a quality product that matched the higher-end tastes of Carriage Town’s more affluent customers.

The fact that these businesses have remained viable given adverse demographic and economic trends is a tribute to their ingenuity, doggedness, and savvy. In the coming years, these businesses will serve as anchors for incremental and sustainable downtown growth. Deservedly, they will be among the prime beneficiaries of a resurgent Flint downtown.

The Impact of Secondary Market Area Consumer Spending

While the existing population downtown should continue to be served by resident businesses, the consumers that live outside the downtown area provide the greatest opportunity for growth in the Primary Market Area.
The table above identifies the number of establishments that can reasonably be supported by the current level of consumer spending by residents in the downtown area (Flint Primary Market Area). The above table assumes a 5% capture rate of consumer spending from the Secondary Market, in addition to the existing level of Primary Market Area spending.

The results are dramatic. The number of retail establishments that could be supported by this combined level of spending essentially doubles with the addition of the Secondary Market Area consumer dollars.

Summary of Market Opportunities

A market for downtown options will need to be induced through aggressive promotion and strong leadership. The consumer profile developed for the downtown area has specific tastes. Ignoring these consumer preferences, or crafting a development program with discordant elements, will greatly hinder the chances for success. The following program elements have immediate potential for Uptown reinvestment:

1. Quality Housing/Loft Apartments

   This downtown market segment represents one of the few that has exhibited strength over the past five years in the Primary Market Area. The residents in this market value living in an urban environment that is different than the lifestyle offered in the Flint suburbs. This population will be younger and more diverse than the general population, and its tastes will therefore be very different from the options offered on suburban locations and along Miller Road. Residential redevelopment in Uptown should lead the reinvestment strategy with ancillary retail following a growing residential population.

2. Cultural/Entertainment Venues

   Flint supports a variety of arts-related options. The nearby Flint Cultural Center is a unique asset for a city of its size. The presence of Whiting Auditorium, FA. Bower Theater, Longway Planetarium, Alfred P. Sloan Museum, Flint Institute of Music, and the Flint Institute of Arts Buckham Alley Theater creates an impressive and diverse collection of arts options. Additionally, there are several opportunities for cultural/arts mixed-use development in downtown ready for initiation. The Capitol Theatre has significant reuse potential, particularly as a venue for non-traditional and alternative cultural events.

   Another potential arts-related project being considered by the Flint Arts Council calls for an art/cultural and retail development to include a boutique coffee house, an African art gallery, a pool hall, a restored community theater, a jazz club and loft apartments on the upper levels. Schematic designs have been completed for this promising development and several sites on Saginaw Street have been considered, including the “Mott Block.”

   Interviews with managers of art establishments in Flint cited several reasons why they were wary of a downtown location, including safety and appearance. Virtually all interviewees cited the presence of the Buckham Alley Theater as a great unknown asset in Flint that could be leveraged for additional arts options downtown. “Gallery Walks,” sponsored by the Greater Flint Arts Council, have been well attended, but infrequent. Experience in initiating arts programming and arts districts in other cities indicates a number of important factors in attracting arts and entertainment audiences to downtowns, such as:

   • Attractive environs
   • Proximity to upscale retail
   • Considerable foot traffic
   • For artists studios, inexpensive rents and flexible building codes that allow for residential living or multiple uses
   • Parking for day or weekend visitors
   • Flexible hours, particularly on weekends and evenings

   It is important that the type and quality of art in downtown Flint be consistent with the urban environment. Art that is edgier and more experimental would be appropriate and would attract university students and the targeted younger audience to downtown.
3. URBAN PLANNING AND DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of urban planning and design principles should be considered and used as evaluation criteria for future downtown regeneration work. Successful downtowns typically have the following:

- Distinct image
- Central marketplace
- Reliable economic base
- Compact building pattern
- Concentration of residential options
- Understandable and attractive two-way street system with on-street parking
- Comfortable and civic-quality open spaces
- Reuse of permanence and authenticity
- A soul
- Visionary leadership

Specific urban design characteristics are found in the most vibrant and successful downtowns:

- Identification and capitalization on unique local attributes (i.e., celebrate who you are).
- Promote and reward historic preservation.
- Pedestrians are more important than automobiles.
- Minimize above- and below-grade walkways—put pedestrians on the streets.
- Build dense, mixed-use buildings with parking in garages (or below grade if affordable).
- Create small and moderately-sized parks with strongly defined and active edges.
- Hold frequent local and regional festivals and events.
c. *Promote residential reuse of the Durant Hotel*: The historic Durant Hotel building has an important, highly visible gateway location to downtown and the adjacent University of Michigan-Flint (i.e., UM-Flint) campus. The Durant Hotel is an excellent reuse opportunity for student housing or affordable housing for downtown.

d. *Relocate the bus transfer station from its current location on Second Street (between Harrison and Wallenburg Streets) to First Street (between Church and Beach)*: The relocation site is located closer to the concentration of office buildings and financial institutions on Saginaw Street and the large parking garage spanning Beach Street. This relocation creates an opportunity for an intermodal transportation center that could serve broader regional transportation needs.

e. *Relocate the Farmer’s Market to the current bus transfer station (between Harrison and Wallenburg Streets)*: The reinvestment strategy calls for a new residential neighborhood on the east side of downtown. The relocation of the Farmer’s Market would be an excellent amenity for the adjacent residential neighborhood and would be seen as a neighborhood amenity. Moreover, the Farmer’s Market will generate more activity and people for downtown, particularly on weekends.

f. *Encourage mixed-use redevelopment in vacant buildings such as the Mott Block and Capitol Theatre*: The block of vacant buildings on the east side of Saginaw Street (south of the Mott Building) between First and Second Streets (i.e., the “Mott Block”) is well suited for a mixed-use redevelopment program of retail, restaurants, nightclubs, performing arts theater, and museums with residential uses above. These uses will be emblematic of the new vision for downtown and will serve to attract more residents, customers and visitors to downtown. Similarly, the adjacent Capitol Theatre on Second Avenue should be considered as part of this first phase redevelopment initiative. The Capitol Theatre is a venue that can draw cultural events and performing artists to Flint to augment the more traditional programming that occurs at the nearby Whiting Auditorium located at the Flint Cultural Center.
2. Establish Downtown Residential Neighborhoods

a. **Develop residential “infill” in the “west end” neighborhood between Saginaw Street and Grand Traverse Street:** There is an opportunity to develop single-family and small scale, multi-family residential infill development in this neighborhood to provide more market-rate downtown housing. New residential development is complementary in scale and use with existing development in the area such as professional offices, churches and small commercial uses. Infill residential development will be compatible with and reinforce redevelopment efforts in the adjacent Grand Traverse neighborhood.

b. **Develop a new residential neighborhood on the “east side” of downtown along Wallenburg and Stevens Streets:** The expansion of the Flint Journal on the consolidated blocks between First and Second Streets (between Harrison and Stevens) provides definition to the blocks on Second Street and Fifth Street (between Harrison and Stevens) as a potential new multi-family residential neighborhood. There is an opportunity for a new linear open space along Wallenburg as a setting for multi-family housing and to create pedestrian connections to the UM-Flint to the north and a new park adjacent to City Hall on the south. This neighborhood should incorporate the existing apartment buildings and take advantage of the YMCA, YWCA and relocated Farmer’s Market. Pedestrian improvements to the Second, Third and Court Street bridges over I-475 will help expand the market for downtown activities from eastern neighborhoods.

c. **Encourage new student housing for the UM-Flint (and Mott Community College) student:** UM-Flint is considering the possibility of student housing.

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View of Proposed East Side Residential Neighborhood

Section Through Proposed East Side Residential Neighborhood
Potential university-affiliated student housing sites in downtown include the north side of First Street between Saginaw Street and I-475, the Durant Hotel, and eventually the upper levels of renovated buildings along Saginaw Street (once downtown regeneration is further along and safety/image perceptions are more manageable).

d. **Develop market-rate residential loft-style apartments above street-level commercial on Saginaw Street:** Much of the vacant space above the street-level commercial frontage on Saginaw Street is suitable for loft-style apartments and residential development. With high ceiling heights, large windows and an interesting commercial/industrial character, this space offers opportunities for alternative urban living above restaurants, shops, galleries and specialty stores that cannot be easily found in southeastern Michigan. This type of housing will be attractive to a wide range of markets, including older students, young professionals and entrepreneurs, singles, empty nesters, and couples without children, among others.

e. **Promote church-related downtown housing:** There is a concentration of churches in downtown Flint that have very strong congregations that come from the suburbs as well as the city. Church representatives have expressed interest in new housing opportunities in downtown that could be oriented toward their congregations, particularly assisted living and congregational housing development.

3. Engage in Specific Projects to Improve and Strengthen Downtown’s Image

a. **Flint is a college town, even though most people don’t think of it in this way:** Ongoing efforts need to continue to redefine Flint as a “college town,” which brings with it an image of student activity, cafés, bookstores, coffee shops, galleries, specialty retail, theaters, cultural venues, nightclubs and nightlife that is attractive and exciting and will serve to bring new investment to downtown. Combined efforts between UM-Flint, Kettering University, Mott Community College and Baker College, and the Flint Cultural Center create a strong and positive downtown reinvestment and image transformation message.
b. *Downtown Flint as an urban lifestyle alternative to the suburbs*: Downtown Flint can offer an urban lifestyle not easily found in Genesse County and surrounding areas. The reinvestment strategy calls for an urban, mixed-use downtown with pedestrian-oriented streets, residential neighborhoods, active streetfront retail, restaurants, cafés, nightclubs, cultural venues, religious institutions, employment centers, government offices, educational institutions, and public open spaces.

c. *Establish downtown “gateways” and boundaries through coordinated streetscape improvements such as landscape and plant materials, lighting, and wayfinding systems*: Through these types of physical improvements, downtown will be more legible and identifiable to the public. As downtown becomes more imageable and memorable in the public’s mind, creating a more positive perception and attitude will begin to emerge and visitation will increase.

4. **Implement Traffic and Parking Improvements**

a. *Improve the quality of the pedestrian environment*: An important short-term improvement that can be made to improve the quality of the pedestrian environment in downtown is to change the existing one-way street system to a two-way street system with on-street parking. Even with significant new mixed-use development in downtown over an extended period, projected traffic volumes can be readily accommodated by this proposed system. The two-way streets will provide some “traffic calming” in conjunction with the on-street parking, and greatly improve the quality of the pedestrian experience in downtown. The additional on-street parking will assist in better balancing parking supply and demand, and in reducing the need for off-street parking to some degree.

b. *Develop a new parking plan for downtown to improve overall balance of parking supply and demand within downtown subdistricts*: Currently, parking supply in the Government District at the south end of Saginaw Street is inadequate, while there is a surplus of parking in other subdistricts that are less developed and utilized. As the downtown regenerates and grows, there should be an emphasis on replacing surface parking lots with parking garages that have streetfront retail and commercial uses wherever possible.

c. *Redesign Third Avenue to become “University Boulevard” from Kettering University to UM-Flint*: Third Avenue is an important arterial and gateway to downtown from the west, terminating at an important location at UM-Flint. As part of the “college town” concept for Flint, the Third Avenue streetscape should be extensively improved to reinforce its proximity to and connection between Kettering University and UM-Flint and downtown.

d. *Improve vehicular and pedestrian connections between downtown and UM-Flint to the Flint Cultural Center*: The Flint Cultural Center, located just blocks from downtown, is an important destination that attracts a large number of people throughout the year, particularly during the evenings and on weekends. These visitors are physically close to downtown and could provide significant demand for downtown facilities such as restaurants and shops. By improving the pedestrian and vehicular connections along Kearsley Street across I-475 into downtown through UM-Flint (pedestrian connection), and from Kearsley Street to First Street (vehicular connection), visitors to the Flint Cultural Center will be more likely to go downtown for a meal or shopping before or after attending an event. Conversely, downtown employees, visitors and residents will be more likely to visit an event at the cultural center if they perceive a safe and easy connection, particularly as pedestrians.
5. Create and Link Downtown Open Spaces

There are numerous opportunities to improve and expand the quality of public open space in downtown. Parks, plazas and green spaces can add significant value to adjacent development while increasing marketability and absorption rates.

a. Create a new “city plaza” on a portion of the parking lot between Saginaw, First, Harrison and Kearsley Streets: This block is one of the most important locations in downtown and should be developed in part as a civic-quality plaza and park. Mixed-use development such as retail, restaurants, offices and housing also should be considered to fill out the block. The open space components should be of the highest quality and include a water feature of some type that is active in the summer and winter to attract people (perhaps a water feature that allows ice skating in the winter and interactive water play in the summer). This civic space should be a gathering and meeting place and be considered a landmark by the public.

b. The Flint River is an underutilized resource and amenity in downtown, and needs to be rediscovered and celebrated as a public place: Riverfront Park needs to be redesigned and brought up to street level to improve its image and use. The Flint River also provides an opportunity for a recreational and greenway trail corridor between Kettering University and UM-Flint/downtown, and further east along the river to the Kearsley Park neighborhood. Bicycle and pedestrian trails along the river in this location would activate the river’s edge and encourage more people to come downtown from adjacent and nearby neighborhoods.
c. **Downtown Flint needs more small-scale plazas, neighborhood parks and passive recreation areas:** The reinvestment strategy plan shows several locations where these types of open space improvements could be made. For example, a new park located south of Fifth Street (behind City Hall) would be an amenity for the new “East Side” residential neighborhood as well as employees of and visitors to the government center subdistrict; improvements to Memorial Park would provide a better destination for the Grand Traverse neighborhood; and a “mews” on Wallenburg Street to provide recreational and visual benefits to the “East Side” residential neighborhood.

d. **Extend the current Saginaw Street streetscape plan throughout downtown:** Over time, a comprehensive streetscape plan should be developed for the entire downtown to provide a unified and strong visual image. Moreover, an overall downtown streetscape plan is needed to improve the quality of the pedestrian experience in downtown beyond the Saginaw Street corridor. This will encourage additional private investment by downtown businesses, residents and property owners, while enhancing connections to adjacent residential neighborhoods. The streetscape improvements should consist of a coordinated palette of street trees, pedestrian-scale lighting, street furniture, and small-scale plazas and open spaces.
4. MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The URC estimates that up to $235 million has been invested within one mile of downtown Flint over the past several years. Private developers, businesses, institutions, and government agencies all have contributed to this figure. Yet without coordination and oversight, these investments will not transform the Saginaw Street Corridor into an active place in which to live and work. Downtown needs a single entity to oversee the myriad efforts currently underway so that different organizations and individuals do not work at cross-purposes. This oversight entity will, instead, move all downtown investors toward a common vision.

The URC is the logical organization to undertake this weighty role. Formed for the purpose of solidifying public-private cooperation in the cause of downtown reinvestment, the URC’s board is comprised of a strong cross-section of Flint businesses, as well as institutional, and governmental representatives. Oftentimes, communities will begin a downtown revitalization effort without a URC-style entity. Flint has the advantage of an existing public-private partnership that is well positioned to spearhead the reinvestment strategy.

Currently, URC’s focus is on acquiring real estate and disposing of it to the private sector. Moving forward, URC’s focus should be broadened. A suitable mission for URC is to manage and coordinate downtown investments in Flint. URC’s expanded role will necessarily involve strengthened partnerships with the City of Flint, the Downtown Development Authority, the Downtown Small Business Association, local universities, churches and institutions, and private developers. The URC will not wield authority over these entities, but instead, will act as a central point of contact in coordinating various downtown projects and initiatives.

The URC will coordinate the activities of its downtown partners to ensure that all efforts are consistent with the master plan.
To undertake these responsibilities, URC will need to expand its current capacity. Specifically, URC will need additional personnel to tackle the following:

**Support URC Leadership in Structuring Deals**

The volume of real estate transactions that are already occurring requires that the executive director have additional support in negotiating deals, investigating potential investors, and tracking the progress of existing agreements. Particularly in the early years of the project, deals will be structured that lessen the risk of private-sector investors. In return for bearing some of the short-term risk, URC will structure deals that allow it to share in the long-term upside of the project. Ground leases and gross-receipts participation deals are two deal structures that follow this model, and may be employed by URC.

**Target Entrepreneurs and New Residents**

In the early years of the project, the URC will need to recruit potential businesses in and around Flint that would consider relocating downtown. URC staff will need to have the skills and experience necessary to pitch a downtown location to targeted business people who would strengthen the downtown business climate.

**Support and Improve Existing Businesses**

In addition to recruiting new businesses, URC should seek to assist existing businesses whenever possible. Oftentimes, existing business owners will spend so much time and energy operating their respective businesses that they overlook improvements to their establishment that might attract new customers. URC can help existing businesses by offering guidance on product offerings, hours of operation, and display ideas that might benefit the business. Of course, some business owners will be resistant to outsiders offering advice. However, it is important for URC to make the effort to assist existing downtown businesses. This strategy of working with local businesses has proved successful in other downtowns across America, including Mansfield, Ohio.

**Pursue Funding Sources**

Once potential businesses are identified, URC will aid entrepreneurs in securing financing for their respective ventures. Also, URC will seek funding for key infrastructure projects that will benefit downtown. These may include street improvements, building demolition or rehabilitation, tenant relocation, public space construction or façade improvements.

**Promote Downtown**

To address longstanding negative perceptions about downtown, it will be critical for the URC to vigorously promote short-term successes and new and existing businesses as they seek to establish a customer base.

**Undertake Physical Improvements**

An appropriate role for URC in the revitalization of downtown is to manage infrastructure improvements that might normally be overseen by the city. The URC’s current oversight of streetscape improvements on Saginaw is an example of this. Other cities across the country have similarly outsourced specific downtown projects to the downtown development entity. Notably, Greenville, South Carolina has successfully adopted this approach.
5. FINANCING STRATEGY

From a financing perspective, the central goal of the Flint reinvestment effort is to encourage private investment and consumer spending downtown. By focusing public dollars and energies on a specific area (Phase One: Court Street to Kearsley Street along Saginaw Street) in the early years of the project, the project will begin to create a site identity that generates new activity and raises property values. Over time, the private sector will respond to the improving market conditions downtown and begin to occupy and redevelop properties both within and abutting the Phase One area.

There is no standard “cookie-cutter” approach to pursuing funding for a multi-faceted reinvestment strategy for Flint downtown. A review of funding sources for recent state and national downtown initiatives underscores the complexities of identifying and securing financing for revitalization activities. Federal, state, and local government agencies, and private and philanthropic sources have all supported diverse activities associated with downtown redevelopment.

Though every project is different, in general, public/government dollars have typically funded front-end downtown redevelopment activities such as site acquisition, demolition, and site preparation, whereas private and institutional dollars are more likely to support rehabilitation and construction of facilities.

Local Assistance

A key element of the approach to financing downtown revitalization will be to initiate and strengthen partnerships with existing funding sources that offer incentives for downtown investment. These sources will include revolving loan pools and grants for start-up activities and physical improvements. Several organizations in the Flint area will be of great assistance to the URC, and have expressed an interest in playing a more substantial role in the downtown revitalization process:

There is value in the conservation of distinctive buildings and architecture.
• The Community Capital Development Corporation (CCDC) is a private non-profit organization that primarily provides small business financing, small business counseling, and loan packaging services to small businesses in Flint and Genesee County. The CCDC also operates the Small Business Development Center for Genesee, Huron, Lapeer and Tuscola counties, and is a certified SBA Microloan, Minority, and Women Pre-Qualification Loan lender. CCDC also operates several neighborhood housing rehab and new construction programs in the Flint area.

• The Flint Area Investment Fund, Inc. (FAIF) is a private, non-profit subsidiary corporation of the Community Capital Development Corporation. FAIF is primarily a small business and housing lending organization that funds projects in Flint’s Enterprise Community Zone.

• The Flint Enterprise Community Technology Center is operated by the University of Michigan-Flint Center for University Partnerships. They provide support for starting a business by assisting an existing business to expand or improve, and arrange onsite and offsite counseling (by UM faculty, staff, students and alumni), educational workshops and conferences, state-of-the-art personal computers and business development software, and an extensive business reference library. The center also houses a business information center that provides access to the Internet, computers, color printer, business planning and marketing software, and business reference materials.

• The Flint Downtown Development Authority (DDA) can provide financing through tax increment financing, a special assessment district, and/or a revolving loan fund.

Sources of funding through the above and other sources will be utilized for the downtown effort, including:

• Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) fixed asset financing (5-10 year terms, 2% below market) through CCDC.

• Small Business Administration micro-loans via the FAIF.

• County loan fund.

• New Market Tax Credit program through the Flint Area Enterprise Community designation.

• Renaissance Zone tax breaks have been cited as key for many businesses to relocate downtown, and have proved in some instances to be a persuasive marketing tool.

In all, these loan funds represent over $1 million in potential financing for new and existing downtown businesses.

State Assistance

On the state level, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) can continue to assist the Flint downtown effort. Throughout Michigan, MDOT has proved to be a major resource for upgrading infrastructure in downtowns. These could take the forms of Enhancement Grants for sidewalks, tree plantings, and roadwork. If jobs will be created by street improvements, MDOT Economic Development Category A Funds could be tapped.

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation administers a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program. CDBG assistance in Michigan has included:
• A Core Communities Initiative for distressed areas
• A Tourism Destination Program
• Clean Michigan Initiative for waterfront development improvements

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality have also been used as financial resources in addressing environmental concerns associated with downtown development in Michigan cities.

**Federal Assistance**

A number of federal sources can be leveraged in downtown revitalization efforts. Sometimes these sources require a local or state “match” to the federal grant amount, usually between 20% – 50%. Some of the likely sources that Flint will explore include:

• **Economic Development Administration (Department of Commerce) Grants:** These grants fund revitalization, upgrading and expansion of physical infrastructure, and construction of publicly owned facilities. These are generally through the Economic Adjustment Program (no match) or the Local Technical Assistance Program (25% match required).

• **Federal Transportation Administration (FTA) Livable Communities Initiative:** These funds support capital enhancements, acquisition, restoration, demolition or site preparation.

• **HUD Section 108 Loans:** These loans, available to private developers, can be used for building demolition, rehabilitation, and construction.
6. PHASING STRATEGY

The Phasing Strategy for downtown reinvestment in Flint is based upon a strategic sequencing of specific projects and actions that will collectively, additively and strategically result in the realization of a revitalized downtown. In the first several years, the downtown reinvestment strategy will include a range of activities along Saginaw Street between Court and Kearsley Streets. This approach will maximize the impact of early investments and create a new identity for the district that will catalyze private investment. For all intents and purposes, practical considerations will determine the exact sequence of events (access to funding, timing of development agreements, etc). However, the actions that must take place in the first three years of the project are clear. They include:

Phase One (Years 1-3)
- Saginaw Streetscape (ongoing)
- Uptown Six Buildings, particularly the Republic Bank Building conversion
- Continuing Façade Improvements
- District Signage
- Arts and Entertainment Block Redevelopment
- URC Staffing
- Marketing and Promotion
- Strengthened Partnerships with Funders

Phase Two (Years 4-20)
- Farmers Market relocation to current bus transfer site; relocate bus transfer station to new site
- East Side neighborhood investments
- Street Improvements (i.e. extension of Kearsley)
- Riverfront Improvements
- City Hall Park
- City Square

The following section will provide a fuller view of the specific actions that need to be taken to adhere to the timetable set out in the phasing strategy.

Phase One Action Items

As the leader of the downtown reinvestment effort, the URC will be responsible for overseeing and spearheading a series of projects and initiatives over the course of the next several years. To assist the URC in this challenge, the reinvestment strategy outlines the steps needed to successfully see specific projects through to completion in the Saginaw Street District and cites specific funding sources that likely will be tapped for each project initiative. Where relevant, it also includes estimated costs of the project in question. For the Saginaw Street District in the early years of the reinvestment strategy, URC-led action items include the following:

- Develop Uptown Six Buildings
- Improve Saginaw Streetscape
- Continue Façade Improvements
- Construct Downtown District Signage
- Realize Vision for Arts and Entertainment Block
- Enhance URC Capacity
- Initiate Business Attraction and Retention
- Promote Saginaw Street District
These URC action items are not presented in a strict chronological order, as most all of these items should be undertaken simultaneously.

Projects to be undertaken after Phase One, such as the relocation of the Farmers Market and bus transfer station, for example, are not listed here as action items. This is due to the fact that various factors will influence the future of these Phase Two projects, making it difficult to accurately model the steps that should be taken by the URC.
The goal of the Flint Uptown Reinvestment Strategy is to transform Flint’s central business district into one of the best small-city downtowns in the United States. Although downtown Flint recently has experienced population loss and relocation of businesses to the suburbs, there is great opportunity to build on public, private, and grassroots support to reinvent a future for downtown.

The 1950s and 1960s automobile economy that made Flint a prosperous city is being replaced by more diverse industries such as education, professional services, finance, arts, culture and entertainment. Downtown Flint needs to incorporate this broad-based economy and reflect new opportunities and circumstances. One of the goals of the Flint Uptown Reinvestment Strategy is to empower small, locally-based initiatives and decisions that can result in sustainable and significant improvements for downtown. This will avoid massive, single-project development that could overwhelm and replace a functional urban district.

Flint’s downtown should be a pedestrian-friendly urban environment that is exciting, vibrant, safe, convenient, diverse and emblematic of the future rather than a symbol of the past. Downtown should be a source of pride for residents and serve the needs of a prosperous and evolving neighborhood, city and metropolitan region, and can be a vibrant, mixed-use urban district comprised of existing uses such as:

- Financial services
- Churches and religious institutions
- Professional offices
- The University of Michigan-Flint
- Arts and cultural facilities
- Cafés and nightclubs

Downtown should offer venues for year-round active recreation.

The Flint River can become a recreational destination.

Great parks attract people to the downtown area.
• Convenience and specialty retail (including clothing boutiques and bookstores)

• Incubator office/R&D space

• New residential neighborhoods, including loft apartments

• Hotels and lodging, new residential neighborhoods

• Civic quality parks, plazas and riverfront open spaces

The Flint Uptown Reinvestment Strategy ("Initiatives for Uptown") identifies the specific actions and projects that can be accomplished individually, while collectively contributing to an implementation framework for the regeneration of downtown Flint.