



# **Turning the Corner: Rethinking and Remaking Downtown**

**Downtown Vision, Inc.  
Jacksonville, FL**

**March, 2010**

Downtown Vision, Inc.  
214 N. Hogan St., Ste. 120, Jacksonville, FL 32202  
Phone: (904) 634.0303 | Fax (904) 634.8988 | [www.DowntownJacksonville.org](http://www.DowntownJacksonville.org)

## **Table of Contents**

Turning the Corner: Rethinking and Remaking Downtown	3
--	---

### **Maps**

Map 1 – The Downtown Core	9
Map 2 – Dead Space in the Core	10
Map 3 – Dead Space in the Core by Type	11
Map 4 – Downtown Employment by Area	12
Map 5 – Completed Downtown Development 2000 – 2009	13

### **Attachments**

Attachment A – Issues and Recommendations	14
Attachment B – 25 years of Downtown Revitalization	24
Attachment C – FY 09/10 Downtown Vision, Inc. Board of Directors	28

## **About Downtown Vision, Inc.**

Downtown Vision, Inc. (DVI) is the Downtown Improvement District (DID) for Downtown Jacksonville. DVI is a not-for-profit 501(c)6 organization whose mission is to build and maintain a healthy and vibrant Downtown community and to promote Downtown as an exciting place to live, work, play and visit.

Downtown Vision, Inc. is a public/private partnership formed in 2000 at the request of Downtown property owners and the City of Jacksonville to provide enhanced services within the Downtown Improvement District, a 90-block area bounded by Market Street, Church Street, Broad Street and Prudential Drive.

DVI is dedicated to promoting the Downtown area, building the Downtown neighborhood, serving as a one-stop shop for information on Downtown, and advocating for the interests of Downtown property owners and stakeholders.

DVI is the only organization solely devoted to revitalizing Downtown Jacksonville.

**Introductory Note:**

This paper uses the term “Downtown” to include the 2.72-square mile urban community redevelopment area bounded by State Street to the north, I-95 to the west and south and the St. Johns River to the east. The terms “urban core,” “walkable core” or “core” refer to the walkable area of Downtown Jacksonville consisting of approximately 25 blocks on the Northbank centered on Laura Street, plus the Southbank Riverwalk and Friendship Fountain area, which is accessible to pedestrians via the Main Street Bridge and water taxi. The core contains the three major “nodes” of Downtown activity (Map 1): The Jacksonville Landing/Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts; the Hemming Plaza government and cultural center; and the emerging entertainment district around Bay, Forsyth and Adams Streets, anchored by the Florida Theatre.

## **Turning the Corner: Rethinking and Remaking Downtown**

### **The Downtown Crisis**

Nearly two decades ago, the Jacksonville Regional Chamber of Commerce published the *Downtown White Paper* examining the decline of Jacksonville’s central business district. This was followed by the 2000 *Downtown Master Plan*, the 2000 *Better Jacksonville Plan*, and the 2008 *Downtown Action Plan*. Together, these documents set out a series of recommendations for resuscitating Downtown, many of which have been implemented. For example, a number of major public facilities were constructed or renovated, the riverwalk was expanded, and an emphasis was placed on incentivizing residential development. These efforts, coupled with a strong real estate market, created a sense that perhaps Downtown had “turned the corner” and was becoming the exciting and attractive heart of the city envisioned by the studies. That has not happened. In fact, many indicators show that the health of the core city is worse in 2010 than it was in 1990:

- Employment estimates for Downtown have fallen from 60,000 to approximately 51,000, with the urban core experiencing the greatest loss. The core today has approximately 18,000 employees and one of the highest central business district office vacancy rates (23.5%) in the country.
- More than 50% of the streetscape in the core consists of “dead space” – either parking lots, garages, vacant buildings, or buildings less than 25% occupied (Maps 2 and 3). Most of these buildings have been vacant more than a decade.
- Downtown’s importance as the major tax generating area of the city has drastically declined during the past 20 years. Where Downtown then provided 13.5% of the city’s ad valorem tax base, it now accounts for only 3.2%.
- Retail continues to be virtually non-existent in Downtown, with more than 40 vacant street-level storefronts in the core alone. The centerpiece of Downtown, The Jacksonville Landing, has lost most of its major retail tenants.
- Safety concerns have increased. Panhandling has become more frequent and aggressive, and on any given day approximately 150 individuals loiter on the riverwalk, in Hemming Plaza and throughout Downtown. Some retailers complain that they have more panhandlers coming into their stores during the day than customers.

- Not one major commercial office tower has been constructed in the core since 1990, the longest period of construction stagnation since the end of World War II.
- The “fit and finish” of the urban core has deteriorated due to cutbacks in maintenance and landscaping.
- Except for recent residential development, Downtown has seen little in the way of private investment or spin-off effects from the city’s past public investment (Map 5).

We believe the following are some of the causes of Downtown’s current crisis:

- A recession which has effectively halted all private development in Downtown, including fifteen planned projects totaling nearly \$2 billion in investment.
- A tendency to spread limited resources over too large an area rather than concentrate on the revitalization of the blighted core of Downtown.
- A large supply of vacant and undeveloped land in Downtown outside the core, including approximately 125 acres on the riverfront alone, which can make it more desirable to develop on the periphery of Downtown than in the core.
- Too many property owners who do not invest in improving or maintaining their properties, under the assumption that such actions will not yield a return on investment.
- An overemphasis on large, expensive capital projects to revitalize Downtown, with too little attention to maintenance, place-making and the creation of a vibrant Downtown experience.
- Lack of coordinated, consistent and sustained leadership by government and businesses concerning Downtown.
- Lack of agreement on a vision and game plan for what is needed to revitalize Downtown.
- Increased competition from the suburbs.
- The absence of dedicated funding sources for Downtown needs.
- The perception that parking in Downtown is difficult and confusing.

During the past 25 years, Jacksonville’s taxpayers have supported major Downtown revitalization efforts, funding capital improvement plans such as River City Renaissance and the Better Jacksonville Plan. This support has resulted in the construction or restoration of nearly every major government, cultural and entertainment facility in Downtown. The City of Jacksonville has further supported Downtown by encouraging the development of hotels, parking structures and residential properties in Downtown, and we have a beautiful riverwalk system on both sides of the St. Johns River. These have been critically-needed improvements. However, despite the large investment in capital projects, Downtown is not the vibrant heart of our city that our community deserves. This paper will examine reasons for our failure to create a vibrant Downtown and suggest broad principles to guide us in making our Downtown a truly great urban environment.

## Why Should We Care?

“As Downtown goes, so goes your city. . . . [People] judge a city on Downtown and it can't be a ghost town.”

Former Mayor Jake Godbold

*The Florida Times-Union*, December 2009

It's an axiom that every great city has a great heart: the historical, business and cultural center of the community. Without this heart, a city has no shared identity – it is instead merely a confederation of individual neighborhoods and commercial nodes.

As pointed out in a recent series of articles in *The Florida Times-Union*, Jacksonville has fallen far behind many, if not most, peer cities in terms of the vitality of Downtown. Greenville, Asheville, St. Petersburg, West Palm Beach and many other comparable cities have successfully turned around their downtowns. Jacksonville has not succeeded.

The neglect of our Downtown is costly to the community at large.

There is enormous sunk cost in existing infrastructure in Downtown that is currently underutilized. In contrast, greenfield (new suburban) development, and its resultant urban sprawl, puts increased pressure on our school, transportation and public safety systems, requiring expensive new infrastructure investment and increasing operating expenses. The capital costs of that portion of the infrastructure lying outside the boundaries of a greenfield development and the recurring maintenance and other operating expenses are in large part borne by the taxpayers. Sprawl also leads to significant increases in carbon emissions, water consumption, runoff and other environmental problems.

Downtown infill development is greener and less burdensome for the community in the long run. Indeed, the need for compact in-fill development was cited as one of the guiding principles necessary for sustainable growth and prosperity in our region by the participants in the recent regional Reality Check First Coast, a major regional visioning exercise conducted in May 2009 by the Northeast Florida Regional Council and the North Florida District Council of the Urban Land Institute. It makes no sense not to use what we have already invested so much to build.

As pointed out in the 1992 *Downtown White Paper*, Downtown is the only major center of employment easily accessible by public transportation from every part of the city. Many workers in Jacksonville rely on public transportation to get to and from work. Distance and the barrier created by the river make it difficult and time-consuming for many of these residents to access jobs in the rapidly growing southeastern suburbs. In contrast, Downtown is a central location readily accessible by public transportation.

## Confronting the Crisis: What Can We Do?

History confirms that there is no "magic bullet" or single project that will turn our Downtown around. New approaches to Downtown revitalization will be required to make a significant

difference. Downtown Vision believes that a new way of thinking about Downtown is essential. We have made the capital investments. We now must work diligently to bring Downtown to life.

It is *not* the purpose of this paper to make detailed recommendations to reverse the decline of our Downtown. Rather, it is our purpose to suggest a framework for approaching Downtown's revitalization and to set forth principles we believe should guide our community in that effort. Those principles are as follows:

- 1. Focus on the Core.** The city needs to concentrate its planning and resources on the *core, walkable* area of Downtown – the central Northbank area and the Southbank Riverwalk and Friendship Park. This is the cultural and historical heart of the city and the area most severely affected by the problems described in this paper. During the past ten years, more than \$1.1 billion in development has taken place in Downtown, of which less than one third was in the urban core. We simply do not have the resources to undertake the rehabilitation of our entire Downtown. Revitalizing the core, if done well, will create a viable and sustainable city center and a model for revitalizing the rest of Downtown.
- 2. Take a Holistic Approach.** During the past two decades, there has been a focus on capital projects, particularly large public projects, largely to the exclusion of the modest improvements that make a downtown walkable and livable such as: adequate maintenance and public safety; rigorous code enforcement; adequate parks and greenways; imaginative and sustainable landscaping; creative and innovative design; adequate and appropriate lighting; traffic calming; and connectivity between nodes of activity. As streets are one of the most important public spaces in any city, we must ensure that Downtown streets are maintained at the highest level of functionality and attractiveness. Physical elements such as street and sidewalk width, streetscape design and maintenance, architectural character, and density of development are all essential elements in creating the positive “sense of place” that characterizes all great cities.
- 3. Develop a Compelling Downtown Experience.** While physical improvements and adequate maintenance are necessary, they are not sufficient to create the Downtown we believe this city wants and deserves. We must develop and sustain a compelling Downtown experience encompassing events, promotions, restaurants, retail and cultural venues and destination entertainment activities, with the goal of building a unique “vibe,” to attract and retain Downtown residents, employees and visitors.
- 4. Ensure Focused and Ambitious Leadership.** Downtown must have consistent, energized and ambitious civic, business and government leadership with a shared vision, greater ambition and a willingness to consider new ways of thinking about Downtown. We have often sold ourselves short, adopting a “get by” attitude toward Downtown's revitalization and many other aspects of our city. We have many attributes – a diversified economy, a consolidated government, a mild climate, good credit ratings, a major port and a spectacular centerpiece, our river – that many great

cities of this country lack. We need to be ambitious and bold, however, to take full advantage of these attributes.

5. **Provide Dedicated Funding.** To create a vibrant Downtown, we need sources of dedicated funding. Funding must be adequate for improving and maintaining the fit and finish of Downtown, encouraging activity on the streets, and incentivizing and leveraging appropriate private investment.
6. **Increase Employment in the Core.** The rate of job loss in the core is appalling and must be reversed. Business and political leaders must do what it takes to make it economically attractive for employers to locate and remain in the core and to make the core equally attractive for their employees.
7. **Focus on Residential Reuse.** We must repurpose derelict structures by converting them to residential use. Doing so will not only reduce the number of vacant and deteriorating structures, but will help create excitement and boost retail in the core (it is the axiom in real estate that “retail follows rooftops”). Downtown Vision believes that adaptive residential reuse is much more likely to be successful in the foreseeable future than office use. However, government assistance, at least initially, will be required to incentivize private investment.
8. **Improve Management of Public and Private Parking Resources.** Parking in Downtown is perceived by Downtown visitors, employees and businesses as inadequate and confusing. In fact, however, Downtown has an adequate supply of parking. We must find a way to better utilize our existing parking resources so as to provide affordable, convenient, and easily-accessible parking in the core.

## Conclusion

There are several positives in Downtown Jacksonville today, including:

- Improvements now underway or planned for Laura Street, the Southbank Riverwalk and Friendship Fountain, aimed at improving the Downtown experience.
- The success of *First Wednesday Art Walk*, *Off the Grid Galleries* and a renewed interest in arts in Downtown.
- An emerging entertainment and nightlife district.

However, despite these initiatives and the spending of \$1.1 billion on Downtown during the past ten years, Downtown is, in many ways, at its lowest point in the past 20 years. To continue business as usual is to allow the disintegration of our historic and civic core.

Downtown Vision believes that, by applying best practices in urban revitalization to a compact, manageable area, Jacksonville can become a truly great city. Furthermore, we believe this transformation can be well along in a relatively short time and without further large expenditures for capital projects. In fact, significant progress can be made in the next three years, with an immediate start on inexpensive but strategic initiatives, such as higher maintenance and design

standards, regulatory and governance reforms and emphasis on improving the street environment and connectivity.

The attachments to this paper discuss in more detail the issues and recommendations described above and suggest some broad steps that should be taken to implement those recommendations. It's going to take more than capital projects in the core to turn Downtown around. We must establish our goals and identify the most effective ways to reach those goals. It's going to take innovative thinking, open and honest debate and dedicated, persistent and energetic implementation to ensure a bright future for Downtown Jacksonville.

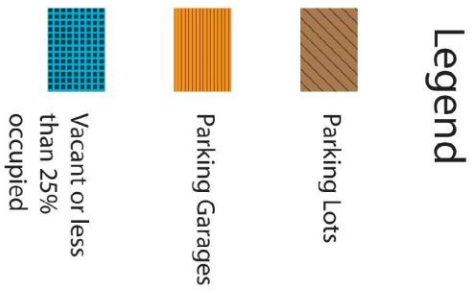
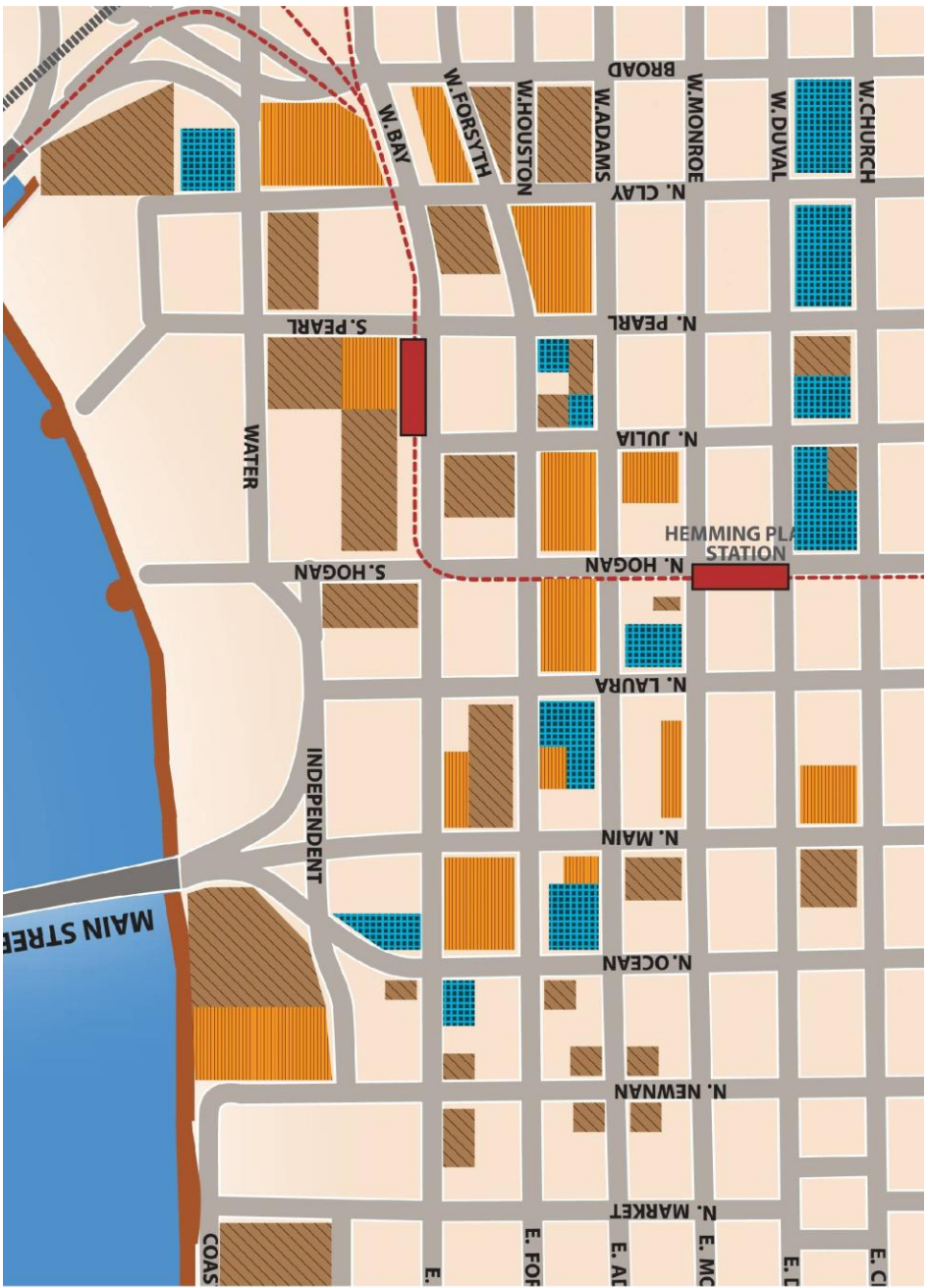


# Map 2 Dead Space in the Core

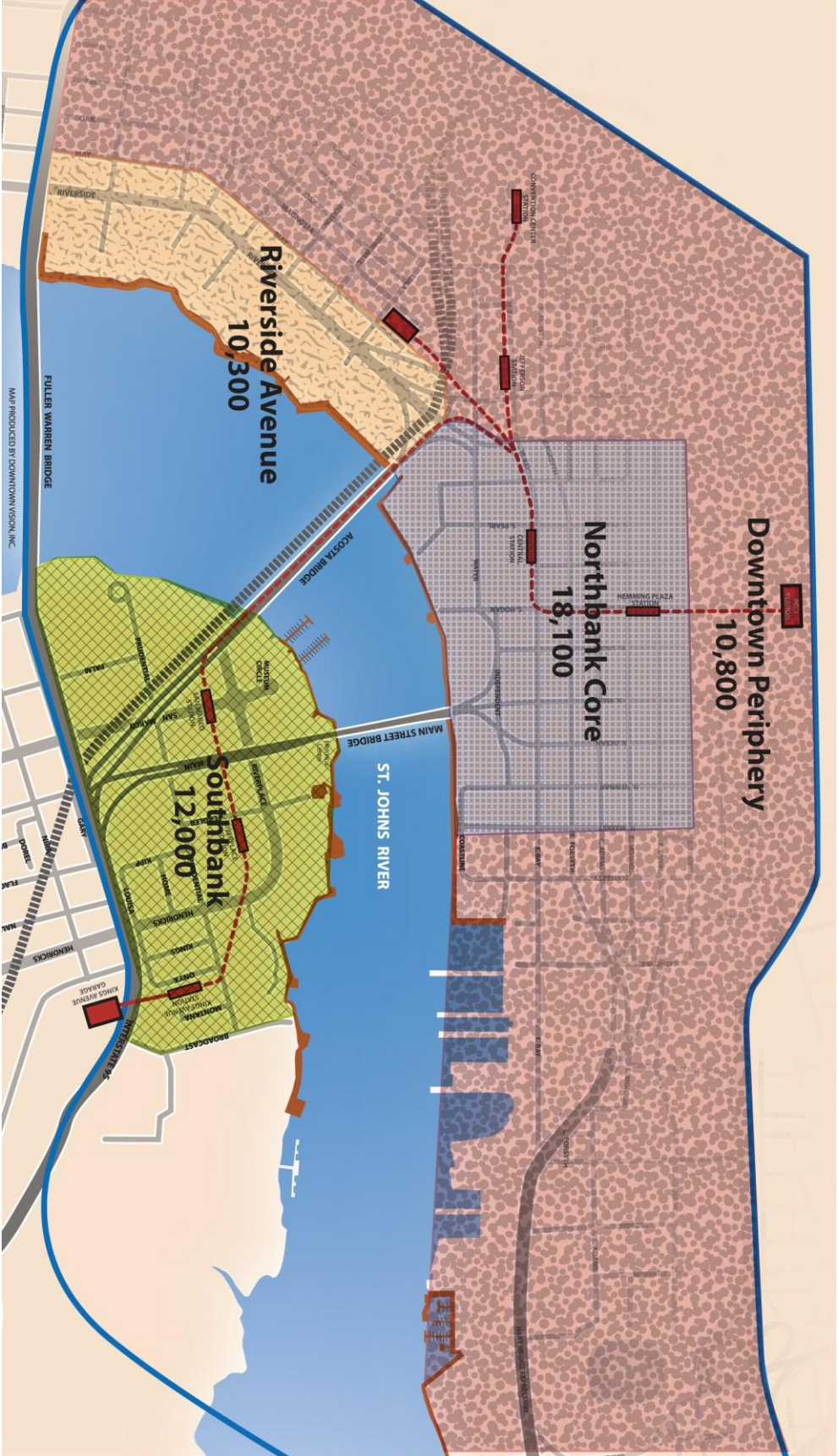


**Legend**  
 Dead Space

# Map 3 Dead Space in the Core by Type



# Map 4 Downtown Employment by Area



# Map 5 Completed Downtown Development 2000-2009



### Issues and Recommendations

Below is a more detailed discussion of the major issues facing Downtown Jacksonville, with Downtown Vision's recommendations for addressing these issues and moving our Downtown forward.

#### 1. Focus on the Core

**The “walkable” core is what people mean when they refer to Downtown.** When people talk about Downtown, and their negative perceptions of Downtown, they are not talking about the Sports Complex, LaVilla, most of the Southbank or Riverside Avenue – they are talking about the walkable Northbank core of Downtown and the Southbank Riverwalk and Friendship Park, which are easily accessed by pedestrians from the Northbank via the Main Street Bridge and water taxi (see Map 1). This is the “core” referred to in this paper. Similarly, most people consider the Sports Complex, LaVilla and Riverside Avenue/Brooklyn as adjacent neighborhoods that one has to drive to from the core.

**Dead space.** The Downtown core is home to some of Jacksonville's most significant historic and cultural treasures, as well as the largest walkable concentration of employment in Northeast Florida. Yet more than 50% of the core consists of vacant properties (amounting to 20% of the core building stock), buildings less than 25% occupied (13% of the building stock), or other “dead space,” such as parking lots and garages (Maps 2 and 3). For example, more than half of the eight blocks of Downtown bounded by Adams, Forsyth, Broad and Newnan Streets is dead space. After nearly 20 years, it's still true that “plywood [is] the window treatment of choice,” as stated in the 1992 *Downtown White Paper*.

**Too small a portion of Downtown development has occurred in the core.** During the past ten years, more than \$1.1 billion in development has been spent throughout Downtown. Unfortunately, less than a third of this investment has been spent in the core (see Map 5).

**We've overestimated the impact of projects outside the core.** During the past two decades, we have overestimated the impact that development outside the core has on the core of Downtown. For example, the redevelopment and in-fill development in LaVilla and Riverside Avenue/Brooklyn have improved the appearance of these areas, but they have had little impact on walkability, business, employment and activity in the core. Despite major development in the Sports Complex, Downtown has not experienced the desired spinoff effects on nightlife and other activity in the core (or even at the Sports Complex). Downtown club owners indicate that, with the exception of Florida-Georgia weekend and certain events at Veterans Memorial Arena, activities at the Sports Complex have had little impact on their business volume.

**Scatter-shot development has not been successful.** Jacksonville has one of the largest downtowns in the country among cities of comparable population. Spreading our investment

over too large an area has resulted in several problems: 1) public investment has been diluted over a large area and the core of Downtown is still underdeveloped and struggling, 2) relatively little in the way of non-residential private-sector investment has been spurred by the city's investments, and 3) we've failed to take full advantage of the best years in the current real estate cycle. Even in terms of our Downtown housing efforts, only 1,541 units have been developed Downtown since 2000, of which 653 units are in the urban core with the bulk of new housing built on the Southbank or in the Downtown periphery.

**Separation of venues.** According to a 2006 survey by Downtown Vision, 37% of Downtown visitors will only walk one or two blocks, 37% will walk three or four blocks, and only 25% will walk more than four blocks. Our urban core is separated from both our convention center and our sports venues by approximately three-fourths of a mile – in opposite directions. The resulting isolation of these areas of activity has prevented development of the “critical mass” needed to engage secondary development of supportive retail, restaurant and entertainment venues. For example, The Jacksonville Landing gets little business from events at the Prime Osborn Convention Center because of the distance and the ineffectiveness of the Skyway in enticing participants of events at the convention center to visit the core. Similarly, bars and restaurants along Bay, Forsyth and Adams Streets are unable to substantially leverage events at the arena and stadium due to their distance – approximately 4,500 feet versus the 1,500-foot limit of walkability recognized by most Downtown professionals. (1,500 feet, or four blocks, is approximately the distance from The Jacksonville Landing to Hemming Plaza.) The problem is compounded by street design and traffic management policies, designed to get vehicles through – not into – the walkable core before and after events at the Sports Complex.

**Too much vacant land.** Downtown has approximately 125 acres of vacant land on the riverfront, including large tracts of land in Riverside Avenue/Brooklyn, LaVilla and the Sports Complex. These large parcels, while enticing, should be reserved through land banking until the core is rejuvenated and the market will support Downtown expansion. In this economy and at this time, we need to focus our efforts on the core of Downtown – cleaning it up, reducing unwanted behavior, rehabilitating and reusing our existing assets, encouraging in-fill on smaller parcels to build critical mass, supporting our existing stakeholders and developing a compelling Downtown product from which we can launch the expansion of further Downtown revitalization initiatives.

#### **Best Practices and Recommendations:**

- Government and the private sector must recognize that bringing activities, employment and development to the core of Downtown will have a much greater impact and deserves higher priority than projects on the periphery of Downtown. Downtown Vision believes that a well-developed core marked by true excellence in design, maintenance, safety and street activity will result in concentric improvement to surrounding areas.
- We must develop a block-by-block game plan on what actions – both physical and programmatic improvements – are needed to revitalize approximately 25 blocks in the walkable core. This plan would include short-term (less than 2 years), mid-term (2 – 5 years) and long-term (5 – 10 years) initiatives and identify sources of funding for those initiatives.

- Incentives, loan programs, subsidies, and event and promotional funding should be focused in the Downtown core.
- Proposed projects on the periphery of Downtown should be reviewed so as to avoid or minimize adverse effects on the core of Downtown, including diversion of funding from core needs.
- We should develop a prioritized list of actions needed to get Downtown ready for business when the market returns.
- Land-banked and other public property should be creatively reused in ways that will activate and complement the core. These properties must be developed in a manner that will enhance – not detract from – the walkability and liveability of the core. For example, if a new convention center is to be constructed next to the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, it must not be a traditional box, but must be creatively designed to complement the Bay Street historic and entertainment district and provide public views of and access to the river.

## **2. Take a Holistic Approach to Revitalization**

### **Overall maintenance and the general fit and finish of the Downtown core has declined.**

According to the International Downtown Association's "Four Stages to Revitalize a Downtown," the first step in creating a vibrant Downtown is making it – and keeping it – clean and safe. It is evident from the ongoing deterioration of core area buildings and public spaces that there is a lack of attention to detail by both the government and many private stakeholders. The walkable core of Downtown is marred by filthy windows, peeling paint, overgrown landscaping and unpaved and unlandscaped lots used for surface parking. It appears that the investment philosophy of some property owners is to spend as little as possible on their property – and it shows. It is often easier and more profitable in Downtown to tear down a building and park cars on the unpaved lot than it is to maintain or rehabilitate a property – and, in most cases, there are inadequate regulations restricting this practice.

In addition to the declining maintenance standards of some private owners, the City of Jacksonville has not provided enough maintenance and support for core-area public spaces. In the past decade, the city has eliminated the floral basket program, dedicated landscaping and maintenance crews, and private security patrols in Hemming Plaza and on the riverwalk. In the last five years, no funding has been provided to purchase and replace deteriorating trash cans, mulch and weed tree beds, or prune trees Downtown. The dollars needed to create and maintain a sense of place in the walkable core are not great in relation to the funding for capital projects in recent years. However, the sources of operating funding can be much more difficult to identify and access than sources for capital projects, as discussed in a later section.

**There are too many panhandlers and loiterers who hang out along the riverwalk, in public parks and in vacant buildings and lots in the core.** Downtown Vision estimates that there are approximately 150 individuals who loiter all day on the streets, parks and vacant properties in the core of Downtown. The concentration of support services for the homeless in and around the core compounds this problem. Those in need have access to more than 12,000 meals served each week, 1,100 beds, and medical, legal and employment support. While most of Downtown's nuisance issues are not associated with full-time users of Downtown homeless shelters, many

panhandlers and loiterers are drawn to the area, and stay in the area, due to the wide availability of meals and access to public spaces with few rules and lax enforcement.

**There is minimal police presence Downtown.** During the workday, Downtown has a dedicated Jacksonville Sheriff's Office beat patrol; however, after 7:00 p.m. and on weekends, this dedicated patrol does not exist. With increased safety concerns and a growing entertainment district, this needs to change. Perception of safety is key to creating a visitor-friendly environment.

**The City of Jacksonville does not sufficiently enforce existing codes.** Existing property maintenance codes and other building codes are not aggressively enforced. In addition, stronger zoning and enforcement codes are needed to prevent property owners from allowing their properties to deteriorate and become magnets for nuisance activity.

**Downtown streets and streetscapes are unattractive and are not pedestrian-friendly.** Fit and finish on a pedestrian scale is essential to a walkable and pleasurable Downtown experience. While we applaud the city's capital investments in Downtown streetscaping, the unfortunate fact is that there is inadequate funding allocated to the maintenance of our streetscapes. The result is streetscapes that feature broken light fixtures, empty banner poles, unmulched tree beds, untrimmed or dying trees and plants, cracked sidewalks and other obvious signs of long-term neglect. We must utilize multiple methods to ensure our streets and streetscapes add to the Downtown experience, not detract from it. These methods include appropriate scale, attractive building facades, outdoor seating, decorative and security lighting, color, green space, wayfinding signage, and public art. Furthermore, we need to cater to the needs of the pedestrian and cyclist as much as to those of the automobile driver, including changing one-way streets to two-way streets to calm traffic, accommodating bicycle traffic, and exploring opportunities for multimodal transportation to build connectivity and make it easier for pedestrians and cyclists to get around Downtown.

**Poor Design.** Good design – both public and private – is key to a successful retail environment and building a sense of place in Downtown. However, many recent (and older) developments negatively impact Downtown. Examples of our failure to require good urban design include most buildings constructed during the past 40 years. Most of those buildings look inward, do not relate to the pedestrian scale and do not embrace the street or the river.

#### **Best Practices and Recommendations:**

- Grand capital improvements alone will not produce a revitalized urban core. We must establish a “sense of place” Downtown. This requires greatly increased emphasis on the whole, including maintenance, safety and beautification, as well as improved design standards and better connectivity between street level businesses and the pedestrian environment.
- Incentives and regulatory changes are needed to encourage owners to provide good design and better connectivity of their businesses or buildings to the street.
- A dedicated and highly visible Downtown police patrol – including officers at night and on weekends – with a deployment model emphasizing not only safety, but perception of safety, is necessary to make Downtown attractive to visitors, employees and residents.

- Regular and frequent coordinating meetings are needed among all relevant city departments and Downtown organizations to ensure that all parties are working toward the same goals.
- We need stronger zoning, landscaping and maintenance codes for surface parking and vacant buildings and lots, and vigorous enforcement of those codes.
- The City of Jacksonville should consider outsourcing the maintenance and safety of parks and public spaces to private entities for improved maintenance and programming, which has been successful in a number of cities.

### 3. Develop a Compelling Downtown Experience

**There is a strong perception that there is nothing to do Downtown and no real reason to come Downtown.** Downtown currently does not have a consistent, compelling product or experience to make the walkable core a day-to-day destination or to entice visitors to stay once they are here. There are few stores and services. At night, vacant storefronts, burned-out streetlights and the excess of dead space described earlier make the streetscape forbidding. Panhandlers and loiterers populate our streets and public spaces, often using public spaces, doorways and alleyways as convenient toilets. There are too few sidewalk cafes, upscale casual restaurants or retail establishments that make people want to come to and linger in Downtown. Projects such as the Bay Street traffic signalization system and rerouting of traffic for major events increase the perception that Downtown is “built to evacuate.” Unlike more vibrant downtowns, there is not an ongoing, organic, non-event based experience that attracts visitors to Downtown Jacksonville. Successful cities such as Norfolk, Raleigh, Greenville, Memphis and Asheville provide that experience, as do other parts of Jacksonville, such as the Beaches and San Marco Square.

**There is no strategy to address the development, maintenance and activation of the riverfront.** The riverfront is potentially our greatest magnet for drawing people to the urban core. While the Parks Department and Public Works clean the riverwalk, no one has been assigned the task of giving the riverwalk a vibe and soul. The riverwalk needs a strategy for development and significant maintenance and programming to fulfill its potential as an important Downtown destination.

**Downtown activity nodes are disconnected.** Earlier in this paper, we discussed the problems presented by our large and disconnected Downtown, stretching from the Sports Complex on the east to the Riverside Arts Market more than two miles to the southwest, and the need to focus on the walkable core. However, even within the core, the three major nodes of activity – The Jacksonville Landing/Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts/riverfront area, the Hemming Plaza government and cultural center, and the emerging nightlife district centered on the Florida Theatre – are physically separated by major barriers to pedestrian access. These barriers include 1) heavily travelled one-way twin corridors, Main and Ocean Streets, that effectively divide the “east” from the “west;” 2) the three blocks of inward-oriented office buildings and abandoned structures that separate Hemming Plaza from The Jacksonville Landing; 3) the scarcity of readily accessible and affordable short-term parking within easy walking distance of all three nodes; 4) narrow sidewalks, which limit outdoor cafes and seating; and 5) intimidating corridors between

nodes, especially at night, due to poor lighting, dead spaces and absence of pedestrian wayfarer signage.

**Downtown does not have a unique vibe.** This community has spent a great deal of time and funding on major events, promotions and marketing of Downtown, but has never approached the idea of building a true, ongoing “vibe” Downtown. Downtown badly needs a daily, organic, compelling experience involving art, music, whimsy, color and energy, as well as security and streetscaping.

#### **Best Practices and Recommendations:**

- Create and fund an organization to oversee the growth and programming of the riverwalks in order to enhance the visitor experience.
- Identify and fund an organization responsible for undertaking regular smaller, incremental Downtown events and promotions (the popular *First Wednesday Art Walk* is a good example) to support existing Downtown businesses and help build a vibe in the walkable core area of Downtown.
- Provide funding and promotional support to help encourage a true Downtown entertainment district with distinctive signage, security, parking, marketing, promotions, and events.
- Support an organization to oversee development and programming of the Hemming Plaza area.
- Revise zoning, alcohol, code and other enforcement and permitting issues to make it easier to operate a small business or produce an event in the core.
- Develop and implement a plan that builds on and supports the assets we already have in place, particularly a plan for safe, attractive, well-lit and visually inviting corridors between the core’s activity nodes.
- Establish bicycle lanes, trails and greenways to encourage mobility, connectivity, activity and recreation in the walkable core.
- Encourage public art on a human – not monumental – scale to provide beauty, whimsy and a sense of fun in the walkable core.
- Incentivize outdoor cafes, façade and streetscape improvements and other initiatives that improve the street environment and spur activity, particularly in the three activity nodes and the corridors connecting them.
- Re-use vacant city-owned buildings as a way to jump-start Downtown initiatives by leasing space at nominal rates to artists, small businesses, musicians and others who will maintain the space and add activity and zest to the core.
- Encourage alternative modes of transportation, such as rickshaws and pedi-cabs, to help connect the activity nodes in the core.

#### **4. Ensure Focused and Ambitious Leadership**

**Downtown needs strong, consistent and ambitious business, civic and government leadership to drive revitalization efforts.** It is evident from visits to successful urban areas that what they have in common is dedicated and ambitious leadership that is consistent over many years. In some cases, the prime movers are committed politicians, in other cases dedicated corporate leaders, but in most cases there exists a combination of governmental, business and

civic leadership. In the most successful cities, those champions are not only committed, but are ambitious, with a “can do-will do” spirit that infects the population at large. For too long, Jacksonville has been, in many respects, a “get by” city – not a “can do” city. This must change if we are to ever have the vibrant heart a great city requires.

While Jacksonville has had engaged leadership for Downtown capital projects (e.g., the *Better Jacksonville Plan*, *River City Renaissance* and the current public space improvements), our leadership has not adequately addressed the less sexy elements of Downtown revitalization, such as maintenance, streetscaping, place-making and building and sustaining a compelling Downtown product.

We need Jacksonville’s leaders to engage at all levels of Downtown’s issues, learn from successful practices in other cities and develop and implement an ambitious plan to turn Downtown around. The effort must provide for consistency over time, regardless of government and business leadership changes. As pointed out above, an ambitious plan is not necessarily an expensive one and does not require additional grand capital projects. It is one, however, that requires imagination, boldness, consistency and attention to detail at all levels.

#### **Best Practices and Recommendations:**

- Public and private sector leaders must define, agree on and benchmark their vision of success for Downtown and the most effective and efficient way to achieve that vision, specifically including a workable funding plan.
- Consider bringing in innovative experts to advise us on a holistic plan for achieving the sense of place that our Downtown is missing, best practices implemented in great walkable peer cities and funding mechanisms used in successful downtowns.
- Appoint one agency to serve as a Downtown coordinator to ensure vigorous implementation of the vision for Downtown and provide that agency with sufficient autonomy to ensure consistency over time and across political administrations.

### **5. Provide dedicated operational and capital funding for Downtown revitalization.**

**Downtown Jacksonville does not have a significant, dedicated revenue stream.** Needed maintenance and repair, such as repairing the deteriorating Southbank Riverwalk, require major political battles to obtain funds.

The city’s current policies, tax structure and use of tax increment funding do not provide a dedicated, reliable funding stream for Downtown, as evidenced by the following examples:

- Tax increment funding was intended by the legislature to provide a dedicated, reliable and growing source of operating and capital funding for community redevelopment areas, of which there are three in Downtown Jacksonville (Northbank West, Northbank East and Southbank). However, Downtown TIF funds have not always been used to fund appropriate operating and capital improvement needs in these areas.
- The public sector has not provided adequate incentives to spur businesses to locate in vacant buildings in the core, other than a few residential buildings.

- Other taxes and funding streams that many cities use for Downtown needs are instead allocated to the City of Jacksonville General Fund – including parking meter and ticket fines, parking taxes, permit fees, and other fees associated with various Downtown services.
- The city does not have a mechanism to acquire and bank land. That ability would allow the city to capture underutilized properties relatively cheaply during economic downturns and bank them for later, carefully-planned and coordinated development.

Successful Downtowns throughout the country have access to a wide range of funding sources. These include: 1) bonding of TIF and other revenue streams to finance projects, including land banking, 2) use of parking collection revenues and parking taxes, 3) restricting use of TIF funds to Downtown needs, and 4) imposition of dedicated sales taxes to promote and market Downtown.

#### **Best Practices and Recommendations:**

- Develop a strategy for highest and best use of TIF funds, which could only be used for bona fide Downtown projects and operating expenses.
- Consider new Downtown revenue sources.
- Consider contributing the proceeds from the sale of Downtown city-owned land and buildings to a development fund for use solely in Downtown.
- We must find ways to do more to revitalize Downtown with existing funding by being more efficient and creative in utilizing our available resources.
- Provide a mechanism of funding for land-banking that would emphasize carefully-planned utilization of the banked land.

## **6. Increase Employment and Residential Opportunities in the Downtown Core**

**Downtown employment continues to decline.** In 2009, Downtown employment accounted for 7% of the employment in Duval County, down from 14% in 2004. Today, the core of Downtown has approximately 18,000 workers and compares roughly with Birmingham, Alabama. Downtown Vision estimates that the entire Downtown has approximately 51,000 workers; however, this employment is spread throughout the Riverside Avenue/Brooklyn, LaVilla, Southbank and Sports Complex/Tallyrand area. Riverside Avenue/Brooklyn has seen the construction of four new office buildings during the past eight years, while no major office buildings have been constructed in the core in 20 years.

**There is no coordinated civic and government outreach to attract more companies to locate and remain Downtown.** In many cities, a visit from the Mayor and a few major Downtown supporters would be enough to convince a company to locate or remain Downtown. This outreach should be standard practice in Jacksonville.

**Downtown is not currently on the list of bid areas for some federal, state and city office relocations.** Recently, government offices have relocated or opened in Jacksonville without even looking at Downtown as an option. For example, Downtown was not on the bid request for

the relocation of the Florida Department of Health offices. Downtown needs a strategy to entice government offices to locate Downtown.

#### **Best Practices and Recommendations:**

- Work toward creating an environment in the core of Downtown attractive to businesses, as described elsewhere in this paper.
- Ensure that the Downtown core is the preferred office site for all appropriate federal, state and city offices.
- Develop a strong peer-to-peer outreach program to encourage businesses to locate and remain Downtown.
- Consider incentives to attract and keep businesses in the core of Downtown.

### **7. Focus on Residential Reuse**

**Residential development has ceased in the Downtown.** Downtown's 2,365 residential units fall far short of the long-time goal of 10,000 units estimated to be needed for a healthy Downtown. While much of the blame for the cessation of residential development can be placed on the state of the economy, recent reductions in government incentives have also played a role. As pointed out above, the core is riddled with vacant office buildings that have little chance of being reactivated for office use for a very long time.

Encouraging adaptive residential reuse in the core will foster development and further the creation of a vibrant Downtown, as well as reduce the number of derelict buildings that mar our streetscapes. In addition, "retail follows rooftops" is a cliché that has proven to be true throughout the country. In the words of Jacksonville Economic Development Commission Executive Director Ron Barton, "The key is residential, residential, residential." (*The Florida Times Union*, December 13, 2009).

#### **Best Practices and Recommendations:**

- Offer incentives for, and otherwise encourage, adaptive reuse of blighted structures as residences.
- Review and revise regulations to make appropriate adaptive reuse simpler, less expensive and less time consuming.

### **8. Improve Management of Public and Private Parking Resources**

**Parking in Downtown is a confusing and unpleasant experience for employees and visitors.** While there is more than enough parking in Downtown, inefficient management of existing inventory makes parking in Downtown one of the primary reasons people cite for not locating a business Downtown or visiting Downtown. Poorly-signed parking facilities, lack of directional parking signage and parking facilities that are unavailable during evenings or event times contribute to this negative perception of parking in Downtown.

**Current management of public parking resources is inefficient.** Downtown's public parking resources are managed by multiple organizations, including the City of Jacksonville Public Parking Division and the Jacksonville Transportation Authority. The aggressive enforcement of parking meter rules by parking enforcement furthers the perception that parking Downtown is difficult. Currently, the publicly-owned Water Street Garage is not fully utilized during the day and few public parking facilities, except for metered spaces, are available for evening visitors in the core.

**Best Practices and Recommendations:**

- Establish a parking authority or other entity to manage and coordinate all public parking, including metered spaces, lots and garages, with an emphasis on both improved and more accessible employee parking and better evening and weekend utilization of facilities to encourage visitors.
- Encourage and incentivize private parking operators in the core to make monthly-only parking facilities available for evening and event parking for visitors.
- Implement parking wayfarer signage throughout the core of Downtown and take steps to improve signage at parking facilities.
- Study and consider innovative approaches to parking, such as multi-stop valet parking, which allows visitors to drop off their vehicles at one location and pick them up at other locations.
- Facilitate conversations between Downtown businesses and parking operators to identify employee parking needs and find creative ways to make parking affordable for both Downtown businesses and parking operators.

### **25 years of Downtown Revitalization**

During the past 25 years, a number of studies, papers, plans and initiatives have guided the development and revitalization of Downtown. While some of these have had more impact than others, each has contributed to shaping Downtown Jacksonville as we know it today.

#### **1992 Downtown White Paper**

In 1992, the Central Jacksonville Improvement (CJI) Committee of the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce released a white paper which outlined the decline of Downtown and provided immediate and long term recommendations to build a prosperous and vital Downtown. Recommendations in this plan included:

- The adoption of a practical Master Plan (Status: Downtown Master Plan completed in 2000, Downtown Action Plan completed in 2007).
- Development of Downtown housing (Status: 1,336 market rate units constructed since 1999).
- Creation of a Jacksonville Heritage District (Status: No action taken).
- Increased security (Status: Security in Downtown has decreased since 2000. Hemming Plaza and riverfront security is no longer provided, and there is no dedicated evening or weekend police presence in Downtown. In 2001, Downtown stakeholders funded the Downtown Ambassador program through Downtown Vision to act as an extra set of eyes and ears on the streets of the Downtown Improvement District).
- Develop new cultural facilities (Status: Museum of Contemporary Art, new Main Library, new arena, new baseball grounds, and Kids Kampus developed and stadium upgraded).
- Creation of a government campus at Hemming Plaza (Status: Government has undertaken development of the Ed Ball building, Jake Godbold City Hall Annex, City Hall at St. James, new federal courthouse and new county courthouse to establish a government center in the Hemming Plaza area),
- Establish land banking incentives (Status: Only land banking effort resulted in the razing of LaVilla with no comprehensive master plan for redevelopment of the area).
- Capitalize tax increment income (Status: 100% of income from Tax Increment District currently allocated to completed development projects).
- Beautification of gateways into Downtown and along I-95 (Status: City has undertaken reconstruction of State and Union Streets, Riverside Avenue, Hendricks Avenue, San Marco Boulevard, Main Street, Bay Street and parts of Monroe and Adams Streets).
- Enhance the role of the Downtown Development Authority (Status: Downtown Development Authority eliminated in 2005 as part of an effort to streamline government).

#### **River City Renaissance**

In 1993, Mayor Ed Austin launched the \$235 million River City Renaissance initiative. Approximately 70% of the funds generated by the bond initiative were allocated to urban renewal projects, including:

- Purchase and renovation of the St. James building for use as City Hall.
- Renovation of Florida Theatre, Ritz Theatre & LaVilla Museum and the Museum of Science & History.
- Transformation of the former Civic Auditorium into the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts.
- Extension of the Northbank Riverwalk
- A land banking initiative for urban renewal in LaVilla.
- Creation of the I.M. Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless.
- Funding for improvements and upgrades to the Gator Bowl (now Jacksonville Municipal Stadium) when Jacksonville received a National Football League franchise.

### **Downtown Development Authority Executive Director Frank Nero's Transition Report**

In 1996, Downtown Development Authority Director Frank Nero wrote a Transition Report on Downtown which stated that no great city is ever known for its suburbs and called for the following actions:

- Zoning revisions for Downtown (Status: Downtown Overlay District established in 2003).
- Formation of a Business Improvement District (BID) to manage Downtown (Status: Downtown Vision, Inc., the Downtown BID, created in 2000).
- A coordinated public relations and marketing plan for Downtown (Status: No action taken).
- Do not widen Riverside Avenue between Downtown and I-95 to six lanes (Status: Riverside Avenue widened in 2008).
- Specific action plans for each district of Downtown (Status: 2007 Downtown Action Plan called for a \$450 million, 19-step action plan, but funding has not been identified to implement this plan).

### **Downtown Master Plan**

In 2000, the Jacksonville City Council adopted the Downtown Master Plan, which outlined the following principles for the development of Downtown:

- Improving access to the river, including expanding the riverwalk, creating visual links to the river and reducing pollution in the St. Johns. (Status: Northbank Riverwalk expanded from Fuller Warren Bridge to The Townhomes at Berkman Plaza, Riverside Arts Market established, issues still remain with setbacks, access to the riverfront and visual links/access to the river have not been retained or improved).
- Development of clearly-defined Downtown Districts with distinct identities and identification of districts appropriate for major capital investment projects with a policy to concentrate activity around catalyst projects within each district (Status: No action taken).
- Development of interconnected, attractive and safe pedestrian links among neighborhoods, activities and open space with a focus on an interesting sidewalk environment, a mixed use of buildings and extending activity into the public realm with sidewalk cafes and street vendors and performers (Status: Downtown Zoning Overlay enacted to allow improved mixed uses; however, connectivity between nodes of activity remains limited, few streetscape improvements undertaken and Downtown development

standards are still lacking, as evidenced by the number of buildings and businesses that do not engage the street).

- Encourage adequate, well-designed and strategically-placed parking throughout Downtown, including the encouragement of ground-floor retail in garages, prohibition of new surface parking lots and adjusting parking requirements to allow for transit-use and shared parking for development (Status: Development of Sports Complex garages, Library Garage and Downtown Garage; however, the city still has no agreement on development of parking for The Jacksonville Landing, multiple new unregulated and unattractive surface parking lots exist, and plans to require retail space on the first floor of parking garages has not leveraged any new retailers because the market currently will not support much new retail).
- Provide a sustainable system of connected open spaces, including orienting development to open spaces, providing urban plaza and green space, using green space to link activities and creating a master plan for storm water retention. (Status: Main Street park completed, plans under way to rebuild Friendship Park, Southbank riverfront, and Metropolitan Park).
- Enhance Downtown as a 24-hour city by encouraging a diversity of activity, a mix of uses, promoting Downtown as a place to live, promoting the rehabilitation of existing buildings and encouraging nighttime uses near the Times Union Center and the Florida Theatre (Status: A few major historic buildings redeveloped; however, inventory of abandoned historic buildings remains and infill development has not been encouraged over new construction on vacant lots).
- Enhance the perception that Downtown is a safe place to be at night by clustering cafes and entertainment venues, improving the streetscape and pedestrian lighting, encouraging the development of Downtown housing and providing evening activities in public spaces (Status: Entertainment district beginning to develop in the Florida Theatre/Bay Street/Adams Street area, more than 1,300 units of residential developed; however public spaces are not regularly programmed and Downtown is still perceived as unsafe, especially at night).

### **Formation of the Downtown Design Review Committee**

In 2000, the Downtown Design Review Committee (now called the Downtown Development Review Board or DDRB) was created to review and approve projects for compliance with the Downtown Master Plan and the Downtown Zoning Overlay.

### **Better Jacksonville Plan**

In 2000, Jacksonville voters approved a \$2.25 billion growth management plan for Jacksonville, which included more than \$400 million in funding for four major capital projects in Downtown (Jacksonville Veterans Memorial Arena, Baseball Grounds of Jacksonville, Main Library and Duval County Courthouse).

### **Downtown Historic Preservation Trust Fund**

In 2003, the City of Jacksonville created a \$7 million Downtown Historic Preservation Trust Fund to encourage adaptive reuse of historic structures.

### **Downtown Zoning Overlay**

The Downtown Zoning Overlay was created to promote and encourage the revitalization and growth of Downtown Jacksonville, and allows for high-density, mixed-use projects in Downtown.

### **Downtown Property Maintenance Code**

The property maintenance code enhances requirements for Downtown property maintenance to safeguard against blight, preserve property values and community standards and establish minimum standards to safeguard the public welfare.

### **Elimination of the Downtown Development Authority and Creation of the Downtown Committee and the Downtown Action Plan**

In 2005, Mayor Peyton announced plans to dissolve the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and create the Downtown Committee. The Jacksonville Economic Development Commission was tasked with undertaking the DDA's responsibilities and the Downtown Committee was formed to formulate a Downtown Action Plan to implement the principles of the Downtown Master Plan. Approved in 2007, the un-funded \$450 million, Downtown Action Plan included four objectives:

- To improve walkability,
- To make Downtown a destination,
- To make Downtown a neighborhood, and
- To ensure a framework for sustainable success.

The 19-step Downtown Action Plan included the following objectives:

1. Enhance the level of service for clean and safe programs.
2. Develop and implement a comprehensive streetscape plan.
3. Convert one-way streets to two-way streets.
4. Create a Riverwalk Enhancement Plan.
5. Improve Downtown connectivity by an enhanced trolley system and complementary Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system.
6. Enhance event programming.
7. Improve wayfarer signage.
8. Refine approval process and create one-stop-shop approach.
9. Promote workforce housing.
10. Implement innovative parking programs and parking management initiatives.
11. Update and implement Stormwater Management Plan.
12. Initiate a Downtown marketing strategy that emphasizes Downtown districts.
13. Engage in active, targeted retail recruitment.
14. Facilitate Brooklyn development.
15. Develop and enact a Master Plan for Metropolitan Park/Kids Kampus.
16. Redevelop the Friendship Fountain area.
17. Improve connections from the Emerald Necklace to the river and upland activity nodes.
18. Identify and facilitate large-scale, catalyst projects.
19. Create more marine-themed activities and improve marine linkages.

Upon approval of the Downtown Action Plan, the Downtown Committee was disbanded.

**Attachment C**

**FY 09/10 Downtown Vision, Inc. Board of Directors**

**Officers**

<b>Chair</b> James Southerland <i>The Southerland Group/ Triage Management Services</i>	<b>Vice-Chair</b> Mike Jennings <i>Prudential Financial</i>	<b>Secretary</b> Chris Flagg <i>Flagg Design Studios</i>	<b>Treasurer</b> Michael Harrell <i>CB Richard Ellis</i>	<b>Past-Chair</b> Stephen Crosby <i>CSX</i>
---	---	--	--	---

**Directors**

Jim Bailey <i>Bailey Publishing &amp; Communications</i>	Debbie Buckland <i>SunTrust</i>	James M. Craig, II <i>Rogers Towers</i>	W. Edwin Frazier, III <i>Rayonier</i>
Jennifer R. Hoover <i>The Vestcor Companies</i>	Dan King <i>Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront</i>	Janice Lowe <i>The Jacksonville Landing</i>	Audrey McKibbin Moran <i>The Sulzbacher Center</i>
Michael Munz <i>The Dalton Agency</i>	John Pharr <i>Regency Centers</i>	Gil Pomar <i>Jacksonville Bank</i>	Barry Vaughn <i>The Suddath Companies</i>
	Tri Vu <i>TTV Architects</i>	Robert Arleigh White <i>Cultural Council</i>	

**Ex-Officio**

Ron Barton <i>Jacksonville Economic Development Commission</i>	Honorable Art Shad <i>Jacksonville City Council</i>
---	--

**Advisory Board**

John M. Welch, Jr.

**Downtown Vision, Inc.**

Terry Lorince  
*Executive Director*