

Downtown



VI. Downtown

A snapshot of comments from Sidney Survey Respondents:

"Downtown would be my first choice to improve. The Downton area has so much history and potential to be a major gathering place for residents and visitors. I feel as if the Downtown area needs more retail shops, restaurants, and activities in order to develop it into a place where people can spend the day and walk freely. I believe by connecting the downtown area with the river, it would bring more opportunities for activities such as kayak/paddle boat renting, a bike/walking path, and a possible river side park."

"I think the SR 47 corridor from I-75 to downtown could be aesthetically improved."

"Find a way to secure and restore the Ohio Building so that it could house offices, or apartments, and businesses!"

"We have plenty of parking. We just need those parking environments to be safe and secure."

"The improvement of neighborhoods surrounding downtown as well as the elimination of poorly maintained rentals above downtown businesses and in the surrounding neighborhoods is vital. People specifically avoid these areas because of reputation and appearance. I work downtown and would love more options for dining and entertainment."

"Access to plenty of parking in rear not easily accessible"

Introduction

Improving the downtown was ranked as the highest community priority by over 1000 residents that participated in the planning process. In fact, improving Sidney's downtown was a primary focus for the last several comprehensive plan processes, leading back to the Downtown Master Plan that was developed in 1978. Over time, these processes helped to provide the basis for streetscape improvements and development of a design review district and board.

Downtown revitalization is a long term effort that relies on the strengths of many people, utilizes a variety of talents, and demands steadfast commitment to accomplishing small tasks every day. Downtown revitalization is a complex process that cannot be accomplished through a single project and a comprehensive approach must be used.

Diversifying the business base in the Downtown will be important to the future and collective livelihood of the downtown. Having businesses open during typical business hours and on weekends is equally important to the image of the downtown.

The Downtown's potential is tremendous for revitalization, especially with its outstanding historic architecture and pedestrian friendly environment. The City should play upon its history, and continue to encourage local reinvestment efforts like those that are currently underway at the Historic Sidney Theater and projects like Brew Nation.

Planning Conditions

Within the center of Downtown Sidney is the Courthouse Square. The Square, which contains the Shelby County Courthouse, serves as the identity and focal point for the downtown. A portion of downtown office space is occupied by government services as well as commercial uses that offer a variety of goods and services. Residential areas are well within walking distance of the Square. However, vacant commercial space continues to increase in the downtown. While a number of people frequent downtown for work and daytime shopping, the number of patrons tapers off considerably in the evening.

The Downtown continues to experience a loss in retail square footage. While this was initially caused due to the development of local strip centers on the City's

west side, today is primarily due to the lack of move-in ready properties. It is estimated that of the roughly 200,000 square feet of retail space, approximately 30-40% remains vacant.

Strengthening the housing stock in the adjacent neighborhoods will support the local economy and physical context of the downtown, and help to minimize the issues that prevent residents and teens from visiting it. The Downtown Historic District and the Walnut Avenue Historic District contain a significant amount of historic assets that are representative of different design styles and protecting them from future deterioration is needed.

However, for this to happen, city officials must diligently work to adopt tools that provide for more proactive code enforcement, more incentives, and more public-private partnerships that encourage residents to shop local and vocalize the importance of downtown revitalization.

Strategies

The planning stakeholders selected the following strategies for implementation:

1) Work with Sidney Alive and interested stakeholders in promoting downtown development and in developing a branding strategy

Sidney Alive, Inc., as of January 2017, is the formal entity tasked with the revitalization of downtown Sidney. The future downtown that Sidney Alive envisions is one with revitalized buildings that provide great living spaces for people of all ages as well as great professional, retail and food establishments. Sidney Alive is fully prepared to work with the City of Sidney, the Shelby County Commissioners, the State of Ohio and other stakeholders in taking a cutting-edge approach to planning the renaissance of our historic downtown and the beautiful spaces within it. Sidney Alive has three primary focus areas:

Advocacy

- Research zoning and ordinances that promote downtown revitalization
- Make recommendations to City Council, based on research
- Secure funding through sponsorships, donors, grants, and tax credits

Events and Activities

- Research, plan and execute events that promote downtown Sidney
- Promote a higher quality of life for citizens and businesses
- Promote the arts, dining and entertainment
- Partner with other businesses and organizations to make the biggest impact on the economy

Marketing

- Utilize vacant properties and spaces by marketing their vitality as a home for the arts, dining, shopping boutiques, housing and more
- Increase downtown Sidney's visibility
- Partner with the Sidney-Shelby Economic Partnership (SSEP), Sidney-Shelby County Chamber of Commerce, and the Sidney Visitors Bureau to promote downtown Sidney
- Explore new and inventive ways to fund specific projects with state, federal, and private grants that will improve the quality of downtown

2) Identify areas to encourage quality housing opportunities

Residential uses should be emphasized, encouraged and continue to play their role downtown, and the addition of market rate housing could be feasible especially in the quadrant east of Miami Street, and south of North Street. This area is severely underutilized and was recommended in the 1978 Downtown Plan (see illustration at end of chapter) as an area to improve with higher density residential and mixed uses that protect the sightlines of the riverfront.

The City should explore and develop programs that encourage housing reinvestments downtown and in the neighborhoods that surround the downtown, many of which are poorly maintained rentals that are directly contributing to issues that affect the downtown's overall marketability.

To encourage this revitalization, it is recommended that City officials could:

- Restructure its existing CRA.
- Utilize the newly formed Land Bank to acquire and demolish targeted structures and promote infill development consistent with the historic character

through modifications to the Zoning Code or the development of historic architectural guidelines.

- Finalize plans on what specifically to do with the Ohio Building.
- Develop effective building standards for commercial properties.
- Target adjacent neighborhoods for proactive nuisance and property maintenance enforcement.
- Work with downtown merchants and establish unified hours of operation.

3) Address vacant and deteriorating residential and commercial properties

Property maintenance for downtown commercial properties remains a top community priority, and is helping to limit new business growth in the downtown. The neighborhoods in and around the downtown area also contain the highest percentage of single family residential properties currently being used as rentals, and should be targeted for additional inspection programs or encourage conversion back to owner-occupied single family homes, to ensure code compliance.

A variety of downtown buildings are suffering from a lack of maintenance, and some like the Ohio building are vacant. It is recommended that City officials could work with Sidney Alive, its downtown design review board and other stakeholders in updating the Downtown Design & Maintenance Code (Chapter 1312 of its codified ordinance) to address more issues than just peeling paint and demolitions. City council should also pursue adopting and applying a standard commercial building code to help ensure a suitable base of “move-in” ready properties.

4) Incentivize efforts that encourage a thriving downtown

Encouraging new investments in the public’s most valuable asset will require a variety of tools to be used, including incentives. These incentives could include façade grants, CRA property abatements, historic rehabilitation tax credits, or job grants for targeted businesses. A downtown revitalization district and/or special improvement district could also be developed. The first step it is recommended that City officials could take is to simply restructure the existing incentives programs that it offers, to include their CRA and jobs grant programs.

CRA Incentives

The downtown and a portion of the surrounding neighborhoods are located in a CRA that may provide tax abatements of up to 100% for 15 years on the increase in taxes resulting from improvements. However, this program has not been utilized as a proactive tool in support of redevelopment because of additional local regulations that negate its effectiveness. This downtown CRA ordinance should be revised to allow for property owners to receive the full benefit of this program in the manner of which it was intended when drafted by state officials.

CDGB

It is recommended that City officials could proactively pursue Ohio DSA CDBG downtown programs. Sidney utilized CDBG Revolving Loan Funds in the 90’s for streetscape improvements. The program could be utilized today for either building, façade or downtown infrastructure improvements (*See Map: CDBG-Eligible Areas*).

Special Improvement District (SID)

The City and downtown property owners should consider the potential benefits of creating a SID. The

Ohio Revised Code (Chapter 1710) provides property owners to assess itself for the costs of planned services (such as planning, maintenance, security, and marketing) and improvements (streetscaping and off-street parking) which directly benefit the district. An important advantage of a SID is the ability of property owners to determine how assessment funds are spent.

Jobs Grant

A Job Creation and Retention Grant Program, which provides business with a refund on the employee income tax paid, could be used in special situations to incentivize certain projects in the downtown.

Revitalization District

Liquor licenses in Ohio are allocated based on population (1 per 2,000 residents), and no more D-5 licenses (beer, wine, and liquor until 2:30 a.m.) are allowed in Sidney unless another license is transferred from another location in Ohio through the time consuming and costly TREX program. Downtown stakeholders could work with city officials to develop this district to help attract additional restaurants and entertainment venues to the downtown area.

5) Optimize traffic circulation and parking opportunities

Transportation and parking issues are often the source of controversy in a downtown. Quite often, the issue isn't a factual lack of parking, but a perceived lack of parking due to poor wayfinding signage or parking that isn't immediately visible to the motorist.

However, at the present time, both the public perception of parking and actual parking situation, as observed by the planning team align, in that parking turnover is sufficient. According to residents that participated in the Plan Survey, parking does not appear to be an issue. However, parking accessibility

and the overall parking experience may be suffering. This can be improved by landscaping, signage, wayfinding and lighting improvements.

City Officials utilize a permitting process to allocate parking spaces to downtown merchants, employees, and others.



The allocation process should be revisited over time to ensure the closest parking areas are utilized by consumers.

Another method to optimize parking, especially during peak times, would be to increase parking enforcement to achieve approximately a turnover rate of 15% or more. The City currently handles this task but could heighten enforcement efforts.

Another method to ensure turnover in the long term would be to bring back parking meters, but the parking ratios to warrant this activity were not observed by the planning team during the Plan update, and the use of on street parking along the Square never surpassed 70% during peak times.

Shared parking should be encouraged in the downtown during peak times like festivals and other events. Some of these privately-owned parking lots during the study were often found to be underutilized. This would include lots at the People's Federal Savings and Loan, First National Bank, the Senior Center, Cromes Funeral Home, Holy Angels Church, and First Presbyterian Church.

The sharing of these private parking areas during non-business hours may be considered as a means of increasing parking availability in the evening hours, but will require additional enforcement.

6) Improve landscaping and signage standards, and wayfinding.

Public parking in the downtown area is difficult to find, especially for new-comers and those with quickly approaching traffic. City officials and Sidney Alive representatives should work to improve the visibility of parking signage and work with existing property owners to minimize the footprint of their "private parking" signage.

Well lit, convenient parking is important to attracting consumers. Additional lighting, streetscape, and gateway elements should be extended to this area. For a better location of this area, *(See Map: Downtown Opportunities)*.

Downtown stakeholders should also work with City officials to establish a uniform and consistent



downtown signage system that could be coordinated with broader City-wide wayfinding and banner / branding efforts.

Gateway signage (both existing and new) should be coordinated with the overall downtown signage system and should be considered at each entry point into the Downtown area. Signage identifying parking areas as public or private is critical, especially those directing traffic to public lots in and around the Downtown. The wayfinding system should highlight not only immediate downtown assets like parking but also provide directional guidance to other public assets.

Lighting elements should also be enhanced and gateway and directional signage should be lighted to produce additional ambiance and a sense of safety. Businesses should be encouraged to light their interior and exterior signs as well as any merchandising displays they have in their storefront windows.

7) Increase the civic presence in the Downtown area.

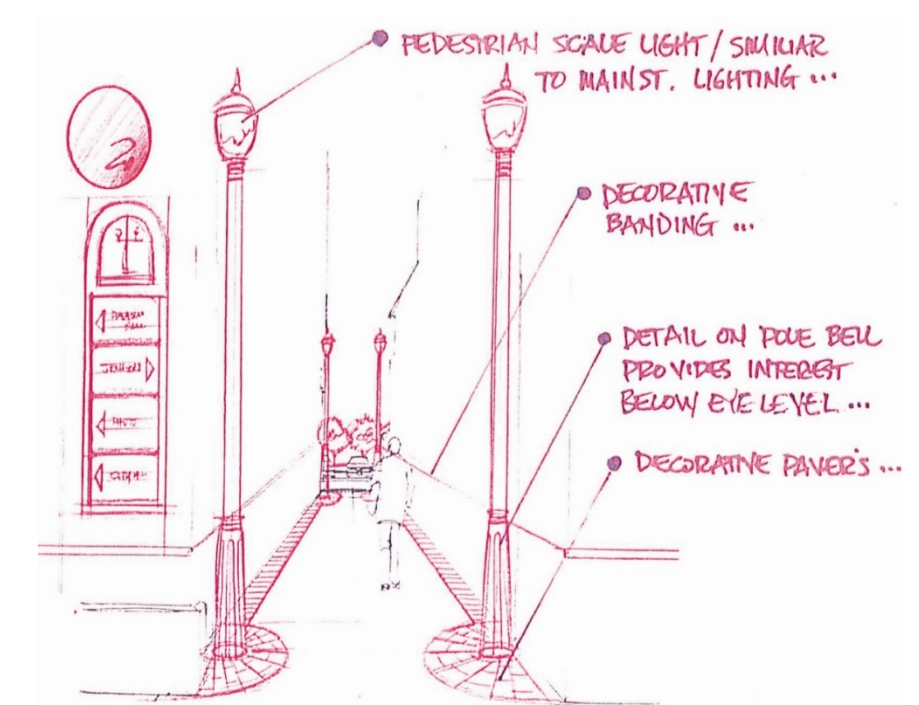
Improving pedestrian traffic in the downtown is a community goal, and the area located at the former

elementary school provides just this opportunity. A repurposed Julia Lamb park, possibly utilized for more year-round activities- and better linked to the riverfront- could help to improve foot traffic downtown. Regardless of the outcome, the site should be used as a catalyst to promote future redevelopment efforts.

Due to the limited space in the “Core” downtown footprint, downtown stakeholders could activate more public spaces through targeted repurposing or property acquisition. Downtown Sidney’s alleys, especially those located north and west of the Courthouse, could be further enhanced to create a more welcoming environment. These areas could be better activated as effective public spaces and host events such as art displays and food sales.

Sidney Alive should work with city officials to pursue utilizing, where feasible, the public right-of-way for outdoor dining purposes. Outdoor dining can help foster tourism and a sense of quaintness. To support pedestrian and retail friendly activities through outdoor dining, standards should be created to encourage uniformity and pedestrian safety. Outdoor dining can

enhance the economic and social vitality downtown if proper standards are created and enforced.



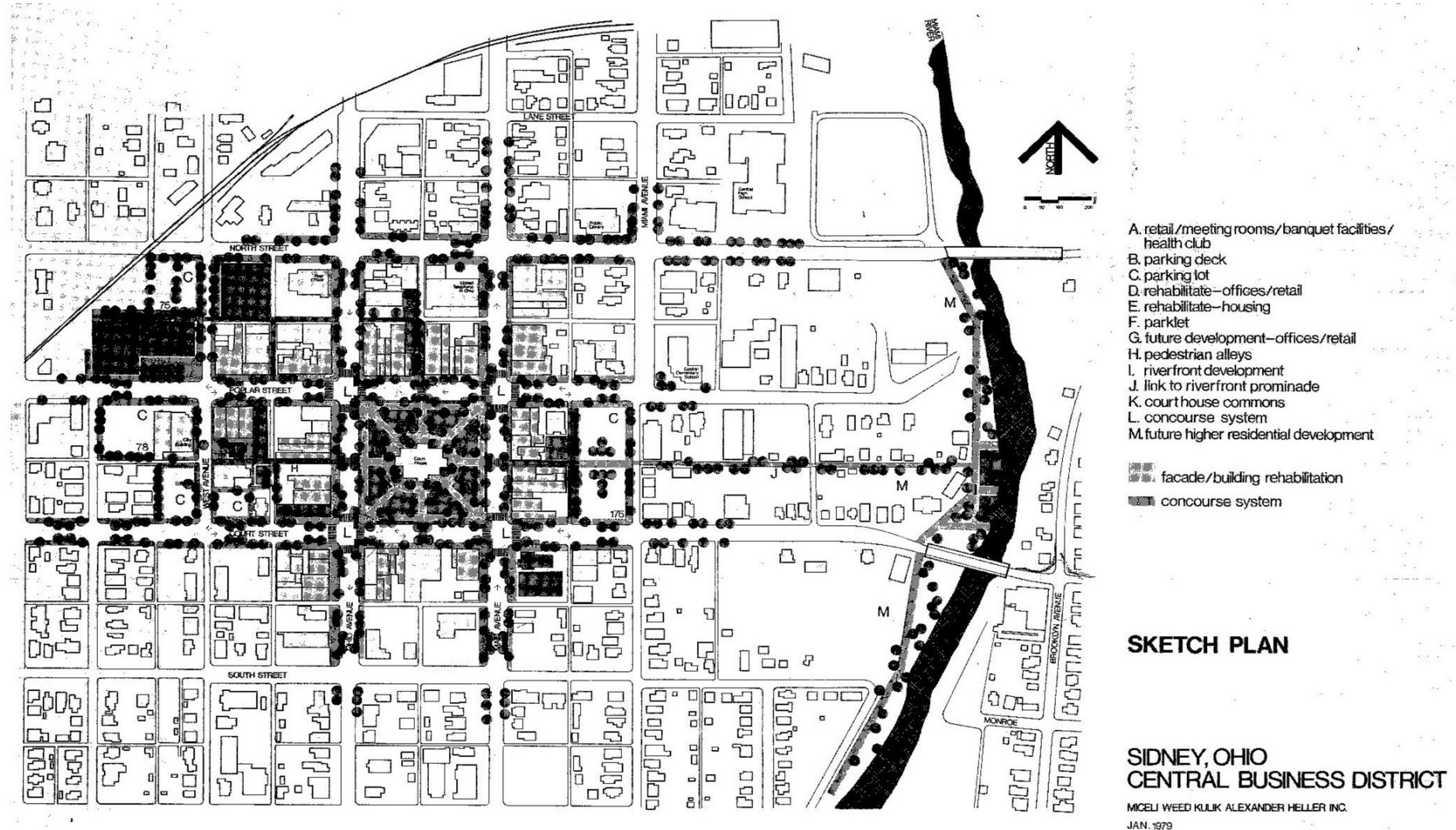
Other methods to improve the marketability of the downtown would include heightened parking enforcement during key times of the day and during special events.

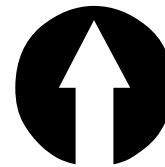
8) Adjust the zoning code to coordinate with Plan strategies and public preferences.

The City's zoning ordinance should be updated to reflect ideas discussed in this Plan. This could include expanding the Courthouse Square District slightly to the north and easterly along the riverfront (see Map at right). Doing so will allow for improved residential and commercial density and minimize those land uses that are incongruent with central business districts.

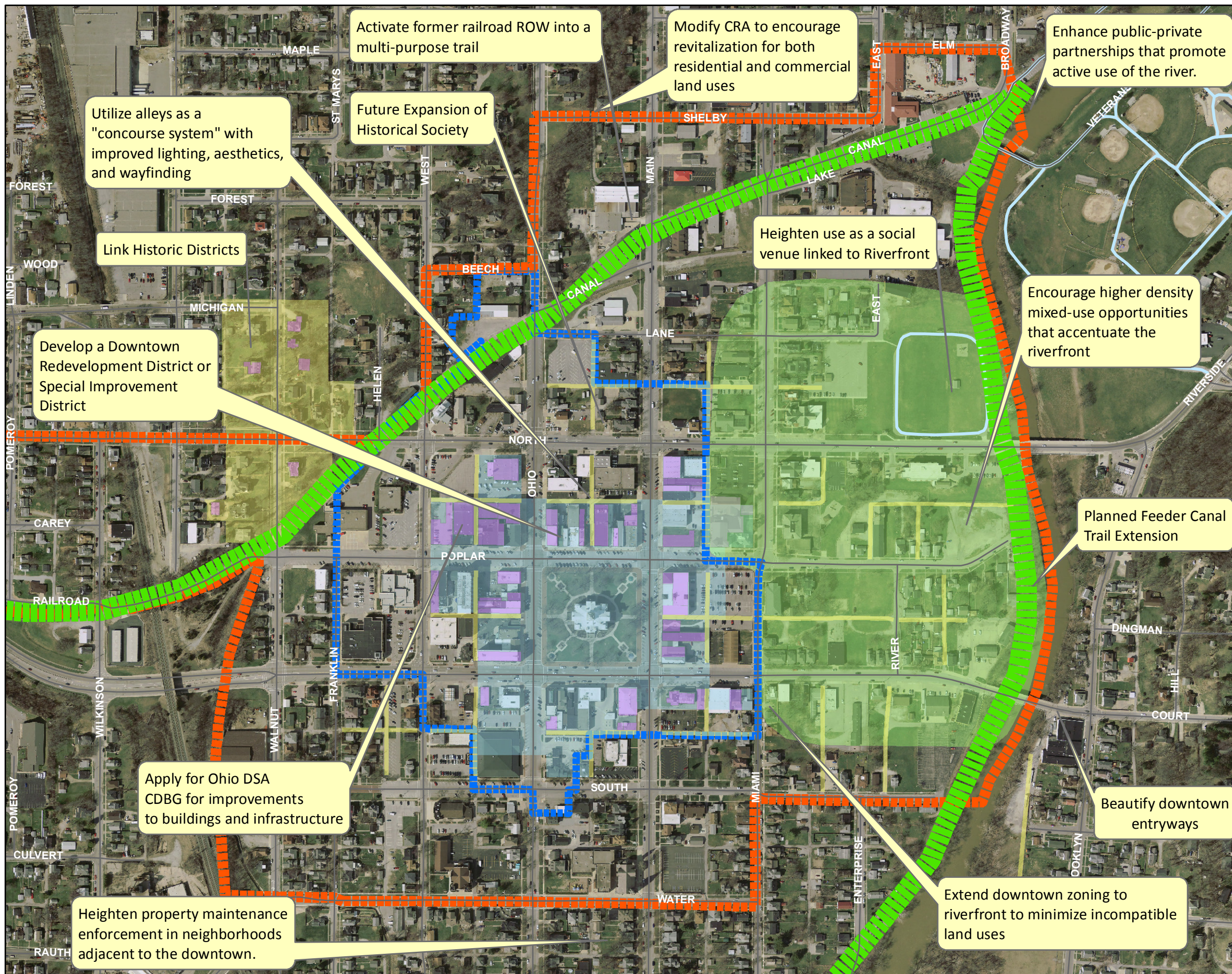


1978 Downtown Plan Recommendations





Downtown Opportunities

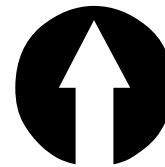


Legend

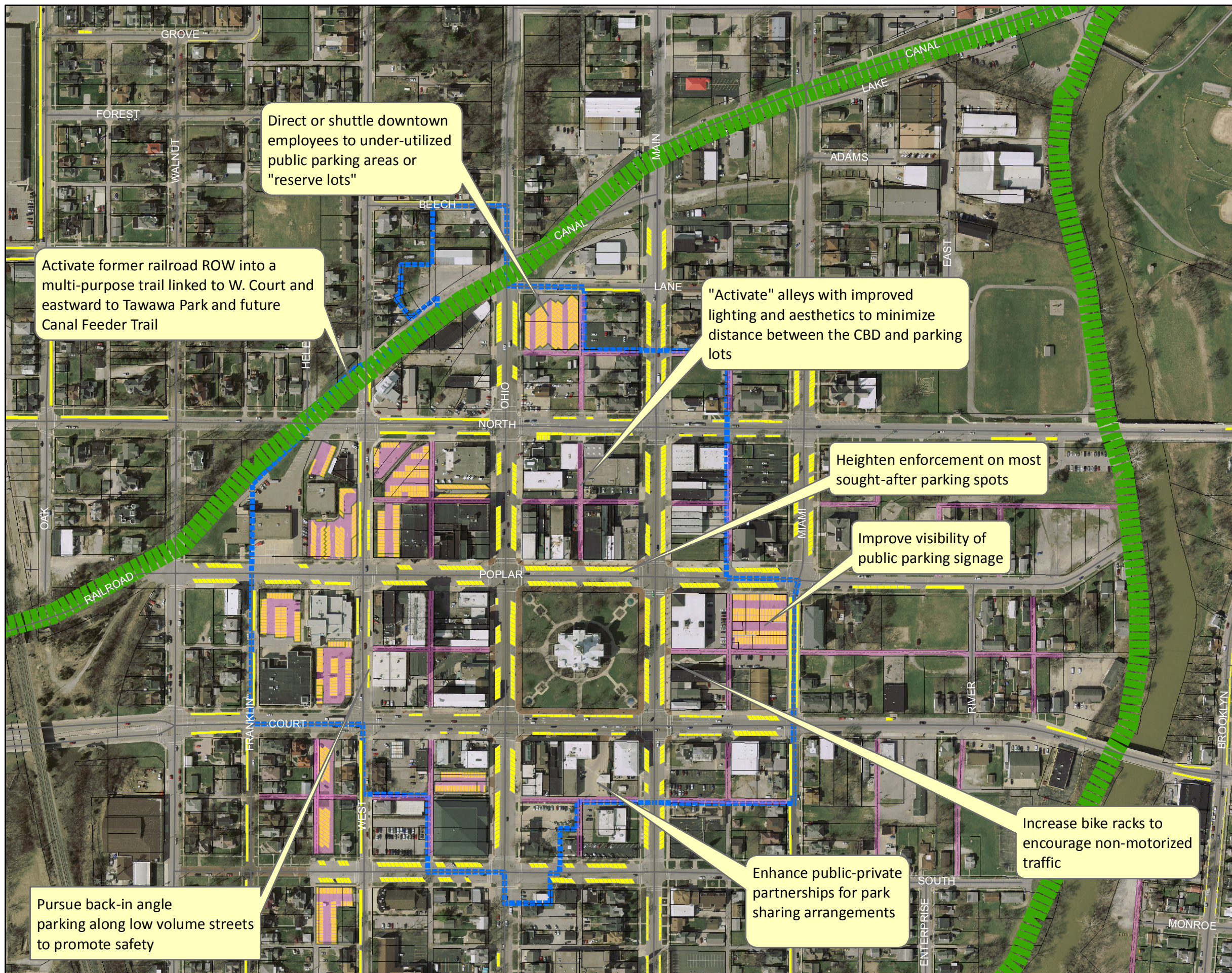
- Streets
- Potential Trail Extensions
- ParkTrails
- Downtown Alleys
- Downtown CRA (Pre-94)
- Court Square Business District
- Downtown Growth Area
- Historic District Buildings
- Downtown Historic District
- Walnut Avenue Historic District

0 375 750 1,500 Feet

Source: Sidney; Sidney Alive!; OGRIP Aerials (2014); Reveille



Downtown Parking Solutions



Existing Parking Inventory:
1198 Parking Spots

Legend

- Streets
- Pedestrian Connectivity Improvements
- Downtown Alleys
- Parcels
- City Parking Lots
- Parking By Ordinance (On-Street)
- Court Square Business District & CBD

0 250 500 1,000 Feet

Source: OGRIP Aerials (2014); Sidney; Sidney Alive!; Reveille