

A Blueprint for Transformation



**REIMAGINE
DOWNTOWN
SAINT PAUL**
Transforming the Core

Public, Private, and
Civic Partners Imagine a
Future Downtown Saint Paul

April 2026

Prepared by:
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Saint Paul

**Downtown
Alliance**

mendcollaborative



**CREATIVE
CATALYSTS**

Acknowledgments



**REIMAGINE
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The Saint Paul Downtown Alliance wishes to thank all who contributed ideas, time, perspectives, and expertise throughout the Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul project.

We extend deep appreciation to the public, private, philanthropic, civic, and community leaders whose partnership, insight, and ongoing stewardship of the Reimagine CoLab participants, whose collaboration and creativity helped shape the vision, insights, and transformational ideas captured in this report. Their engagement reflects a shared belief that downtown Saint Paul is not only an economic center, but also a civic, cultural, and social heart of the community.

Our thanks to our partners for their collaboration and support, and to the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, whose investment in the Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul project as well as community vitality and civic engagement continues to strengthen initiatives that shape the future vitality of Saint Paul and the region.

**LEARN MORE ABOUT SPDA
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Saint Paul Downtown Alliance

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Table of Contents

2	Acknowledgments
5	Introduction
6	A Moment of Opportunity for Downtown Saint Paul
8	What We Heard
12	Inside the Reimagine CoLab Experience
14	The Reimagine CoLab in Action
23	Future Directions for Downtown Saint Paul
32	Themes Across the Reimagine Process
34	CoLab Voices
35	Visualizing a More Connected Downtown
38	Looking Ahead



CoLab Day 1



CoLab Day 2

CoLab Day 3



Introduction

***Downtown Saint Paul
is at an important
moment of transition.***

Changes in how people live, work, and gather are reshaping downtowns across the country, creating both challenges and new opportunities for the city's core.

The Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul initiative was launched to explore the future of downtown at a moment of significant change and opportunity. Led by the Saint Paul Downtown Alliance in partnership with Creative Catalysts and Mend Collaborative, the initiative was designed to elevate community voice, deepen shared understanding, and spark new thinking about what downtown Saint Paul could become in the years ahead.

Through a broad engagement process and three one-day Reimagine CoLab cohorts, participants were invited to reflect on lived experience, identify emerging opportunities, and imagine new possibilities for the downtown core. The process brought together residents, business and community leaders, creatives, public sector partners, and other stakeholders to explore how downtown might evolve to better support connection, belonging, vitality, and everyday life.

This report provides a concise synthesis of the transformational themes and possible directions that emerged from the Reimagine visioning process. Rather than serving as a prescriptive plan, it is intended as a community-informed reflection and strategic conversation tool to help guide ongoing collaboration, investment, and transformation efforts in downtown Saint Paul.



A Moment of Opportunity for Downtown Saint Paul

Evolving workplace patterns, changing retail habits, rising expectations for public space, and growing demand for mixed-use urban neighborhoods continue to redefine the role of downtowns nationwide.

These conditions create a significant opportunity to reimagine downtown

in ways that are more connected, inclusive, welcoming, and responsive to everyday life.

Like downtowns across the country, Downtown Saint Paul is navigating profound shifts in how people work, gather, move through urban spaces, and experience city life. While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many of these changes, the transformation began long before 2020.

What distinguishes Saint Paul in this moment is not simply the scale of its challenges but the strength of its civic infrastructure, institutional leadership, and collaborative spirit. Downtown Saint Paul benefits from a uniquely engaged network of public, private, philanthropic, civic, and community partners who recognize that downtown's future matters not only to the urban core but to the vitality of the entire city and region.

Saint Paul also possesses extraordinary assets on which to build: a rich civic and cultural identity, historic neighborhoods, regional destinations, strong institutional anchors, an expanding residential community, and a downtown core that remains uniquely walkable, connected, and human-scaled. Together, these strengths create an opportunity not simply to recover, but to reimagine what downtown can become for the next generation.

Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul emerged within this broader context as a community-informed effort to explore new possibilities for the downtown core. Through public engagement activities and three one-day Reimagine CoLab cohorts, residents, workers, community leaders, creatives, business representatives, and public sector partners came together to imagine a downtown that is more connected, welcoming, vibrant, and relevant to everyday life.

The following sections synthesize the major themes, ideas, and future directions that emerged through the process and explore how participants envision the continued evolution of downtown Saint Paul.





"It is so important that when we reimagine the city, we imagine it with all the different types of people who choose to live in our city and choose to make it their home.

I want to be a strong partner with whatever comes out of this, and the contributions that come from the reimagining process will shape how I move forward."

KAOHLY HER

Mayor of Saint Paul



"This conversation about how to build our downtown into the greatest downtown ever. Reimage Downtown Saint Paul was an immersive experience that involved listening and envisioning a different and better future for downtown."

JOE SPENCER, PRESIDENT

Saint Paul Downtown Alliance



"The Reimagine CoLab process represents a lot of the relationships that make up a community and a healthy place to live and do business and enjoy."

DAVE HIGGINS, PRESIDENT

Saint Paul Downtown Development Corporation



What We Heard

***Public engagement was
a central component of
the Reimagine Downtown
Saint Paul initiative,***

designed to ensure that the future of downtown is informed by the people who live in, work in, and experience it every day.

The engagement process reached a broad cross-section of the Saint Paul community. More than 1,000 participants contributed through surveys, conversations, and an interactive mapping tool, including more than 500 survey responses and hundreds of map-based comments and ideas. This breadth of input reflects a wide range of experiences and perspectives, providing a strong foundation for the work that followed.

Across engagement activities, participants were asked to reflect on what is working well, what is missing, and what downtown Saint Paul could become. While perspectives varied, several consistent insights emerged.

Participants expressed a strong desire for a downtown that supports everyday life — a place where people can live, gather, and meet daily needs, not only a destination for work or events. Many emphasized the importance of increasing residential presence and creating amenities that serve a diverse community throughout the day and year.

A more connected and walkable downtown experience was another clear priority. Participants described the need for stronger connections between key destinations, improved navigation, and streets that invite exploration rather than quick movement from place to place.

Public spaces were also identified as essential to downtown's future. Parks, plazas, and gathering places were seen as important settings for both everyday use and community activity, contributing to a sense of vibrancy and belonging.



WHAT WE HEARD

Participants highlighted the importance of supporting small businesses and local entrepreneurs, as well as creating spaces that reflect the diversity and cultural richness of Saint Paul. Many also emphasized the opportunity to build on downtown's existing assets — including historic architecture, the Mississippi River, and established parks — as a foundation for future growth.

These insights provided critical direction for the Reimagine CoLab experience, where participants worked together to explore ideas further and develop potential scenarios for downtown's future.



Engagement

Snapshot:

1,000+

Participants

500+

Survey Responses

3

One-day CoLabs

70

CoLab Participants



WHAT WE LEARNED

Survey Key Themes + Data

The public engagement survey explored how different groups experience downtown Saint Paul's core and what would make it stronger. It was designed to understand whether downtown functions not only as an event destination, but as a place that supports everyday needs.



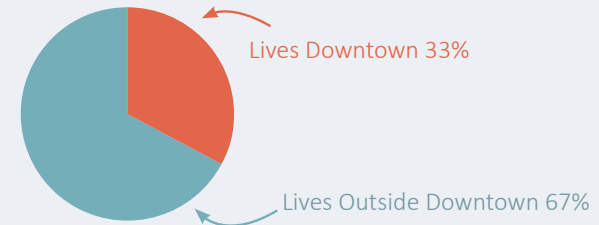
The Public Engagement Survey summary and presentation can be found on the Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul website.

<https://engage.mendcollaborative.com/reimaginedowntownstp>

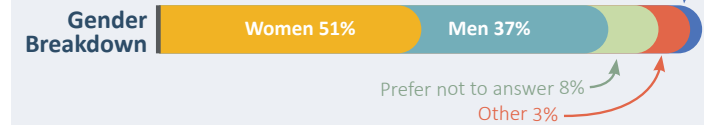
Engagement to Date

1,000+
RESPONDENTS

RESIDENCY



DEMOGRAPHICS



13%
LGBTQ+

7%
People of Color

20%
Under 35 Years Old

3%
Hispanic, Latine, or
Spanish origin



What Works



Events & Programming

Downtown feels most alive, safe, and worth visiting when programmed and celebratory, highlighting its strength as an event district.



Arts & Culture

Across all groups, arts and cultural institutions are consistently valued as defining strengths and foundational to downtown's identity.



Sports & Entertainment Venues

Major sports and entertainment venues draw energy and visitors downtown, reinforcing its role as an event-driven rather than everyday neighborhood.



Parks & Riverfront

Public spaces are highly valued and seen as key assets, especially for walking, gathering, and family use. However, many people only use them during daytime, summer, or events due to safety concerns.



Walkability & Skyways

Walkability and the skyway system are defining strengths that support accessibility and car-light living, though closures and vacancies have weakened their reliability.



Transit Service

Ease of transit use was consistently rated highly, with references to Green Line, as well as newer investments in the Gold Line and B Line. Many cited concerns about safety, especially by Central Station.

Major Pain Points



Loss of Everyday Amenities

The most significant pain point is the loss of everyday amenities, especially groceries, restaurants, retail, fitness options, and skyway food variety. As a result, many describe downtown as an event-only district that feels empty after work hours and no longer functions as a full neighborhood.



Safety Concerns

Safety and disorder are major concerns for many respondents, particularly in the evenings, on transit, and in the skyways. While experiences vary, perceptions of crime, harassment, and cleanliness directly limit park use, transit ridership, evening activity, and family participation.



Post Pandemic Decline

Many respondents describe a clear decline since 2020, contrasting past vibrancy with today's emptier streets and reduced energy. This sense of loss and nostalgia strongly shapes how people perceive downtown's current challenges and future potential.



Parking & Access Friction

Recurring concerns around parking costs, construction impacts, and confusing street closures contribute to a broader sense of access barriers. While some bike infrastructure is praised and some criticized, the overall effect is that downtown feels harder to navigate and less convenient, which discourages spontaneous visits, and reduces frequency of use.



Inside the Reimagine CoLab Experience

The Reimagine CoLab experience was designed as a structured, collaborative process to build on the insights gathered through public engagement and explore what downtown Saint Paul's future could become.

Rather than convening a single event, Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul was structured as a series of three one-day Reimagine CoLab cohorts. Together, the cohorts brought a diverse mix of residents, business and institutional leaders, public sector representatives, creatives, entrepreneurs, and community stakeholders to a shared exploration of downtown's future. The multi-session format created space for both expansive thinking and grounded dialogue, allowing ideas to evolve through conversation, reflection, and collaboration.

The design of the Reimagine CoLab was intentional and participatory. Rather than simply gathering input, participants were invited to actively shape, test, and refine ideas together. Through a series of facilitated conversations and collaborative design activities, participants explored emerging opportunities, engaged differing perspectives, and built upon themes surfaced through earlier public engagement.

The experience began with vision-setting discussions focused on the future identity and experience of downtown Saint Paul. Drawing from public engagement insights as well as personal and professional lived experience, participants explored what a transformed downtown core could look, feel, and function like in the years ahead.

Participants then moved into a structured scenario-building exercise designed to translate broad aspirations into more defined concepts and possibilities. Working in small groups, they considered how different approaches to redevelopment, public space, connectivity, culture, mobility, and everyday activity might shape the downtown experience over time. The process encouraged both imagination and practical thinking, challenging participants to explore ambitious ideas while remaining responsive to real conditions, assets, and opportunities.

Throughout the CoLab experience, participants were asked to think beyond immediate challenges and consider the long-term evolution of downtown Saint Paul. The process emphasized collaboration, shared stewardship, and the importance of creating a downtown that serves the broader community across generations.

By the conclusion of the Reimagine CoLab series, participants had developed a range of interconnected ideas that reflected both the diversity of perspectives represented and a shared commitment to downtown Saint Paul's future. The sections that follow explore how these ideas began to take shape through themes, visions, and emerging transformation themes.





The Reimagine CoLab in Action

Across three one-day design sessions, the Reimagine CoLab guided participants through a **collaborative process of vision-casting and scenario-building exercises** focused on possible future directions for downtown Saint Paul.

Opening and framing

The Reimagine CoLab began by establishing a shared purpose and set of agreements for how participants would work together. Participants were invited to bring their full perspectives into the room — as residents, workers, leaders, and community members — and to engage with one another in a spirit of curiosity and collaboration.

A central framing for the work was a shared aspiration: that downtown Saint Paul can thrive as a vibrant, welcoming place for the entire community. Participants were encouraged to think beyond immediate challenges and consider what downtown could become over time, including how future generations might experience the city.

Vision-setting conversations

The first phase of the Reimagine CoLab focused on vision-setting. Building on insights from public engagement, participants worked in small groups to imagine what a transformed downtown core could look and feel like.

These conversations emphasized possibilities rather than constraints. Participants explored questions of identity, experience, and belonging — what would make downtown feel welcoming, intuitive, and alive throughout the day and across seasons.

Across these early visioning exercises, participants identified a set of consistent patterns that describe what a transformed downtown could become. Working in small groups, participants created vision boards grounded in public engagement insights and their own lived experience of Saint Paul.





Day 1 Group 1

Downtown St. Paul is a fun + exciting place where multicultural, multigenerational folks gather + coexist.



Day 1 Group 2

Historic riverfront downtown that is dense, prosperous, sustainable, and wonder walkable!



Day 1 Group 3

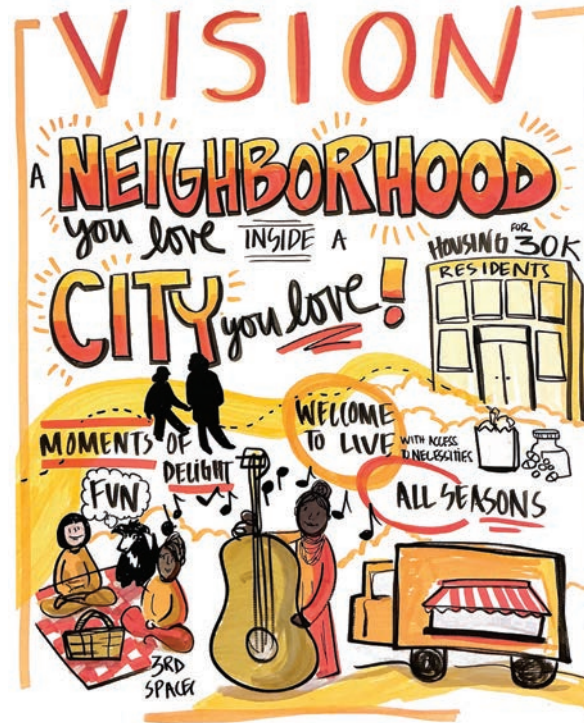
Meandering access to a multi-level ecosystem for holistic living.





Day 2 Group 1

Downtown Saint Paul is a unique, thriving, and beautiful neighborhood packed full of innovative, made-in-St.-Paul businesses where everyday memories and experiences are made.



Day 2 Group 2

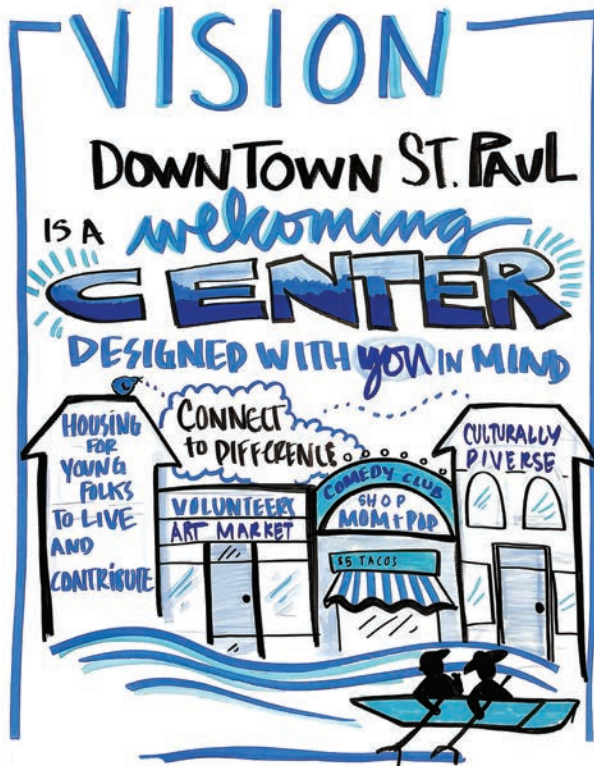
A neighborhood you love inside a city you love.



Day 2 Group 3

Each block links us to new and unexpected experiences to connect with our vibrant, whole community.





Day 3 Group 1

Downtown Saint Paul is a welcoming center designed with you in mind.



Day 3 Group 2

A place to JUST BE.



Day 3 Group 3

A diverse, affordable, and thriving community connected by a cohesive ecosystem and neighborhood.



THE REIMAGINE COLAB IN ACTION

While each group brought distinct perspectives, six themes emerged repeatedly across the vision boards, reflecting a shared direction for downtown's future:



1. DOWNTOWN AS A NEIGHBORHOOD

Participants described a downtown that functions as a true neighborhood — a place where people live, gather, and meet their daily needs, supported by housing, services, and everyday amenities.

2. WALKABILITY, DISCOVERY, AND EXPERIENCE

Participants envisioned a downtown where exploration is part of the experience, with streets and corridors that offer activity, culture, and moments of discovery on every block.

3. DENSITY AND RESIDENTS AS THE ENGINE OF VITALITY

A greater residential presence was seen as essential to supporting local businesses, activating streets, and sustaining daily life downtown.

4. PUBLIC SPACE AS THE SOCIAL HEART

Parks, plazas, and gathering spaces were described as central to downtown life, functioning as shared environments for connection, activity, and community.

5. DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Participants emphasized the importance of a downtown that reflects the full diversity of Saint Paul, with spaces and programming that are welcoming and representative of the broader community.

6. BUILDING ON SAINT PAUL'S DISTINCTIVE ASSETS

Rather than starting from scratch, participants highlighted the opportunity to strengthen and connect existing assets, including historic architecture, the Mississippi River, and cultural institutions.

These themes established a shared foundation that carried forward into later phases of the CoLab, informing how participants explored ideas and developed vision scenarios for downtown's future.



Exploring Future Transformation

Following the vision-setting phase, participants moved into deeper exploration of ideas. Through facilitated discussions and design exercises, groups began to consider how their aspirations could take shape in the physical and social fabric of downtown.

Participants engaged with questions related to connectivity, public space, land use, and economic activity. They considered how different elements — from streets and corridors to parks, businesses, and cultural institutions — could work together to create a more cohesive and active downtown experience.

This phase allowed participants to build on one another's ideas, identify points of alignment, and surface areas where different perspectives or priorities emerged. It also created space to connect big-picture thinking with the realities of existing conditions and opportunities within downtown Saint Paul.

Reimagining the Downtown Core

The final phase of the Reimagine CoLab focused on developing and refining a series of future-oriented ideas for the downtown core. Working collaboratively in groups, participants translated earlier ideas and themes into more defined approaches that explored how downtown Saint Paul could evolve.

The transformation themes reflected different ways of organizing activity, investment, public space, and development within downtown. Some emphasized strengthening key corridors to create continuous, pedestrian-oriented experiences and stronger connections between destinations. Others focused on creating a more concentrated civic heart anchored by public space, culture, housing, and everyday activity. Additional concepts explored more distributed approaches, where a network of smaller-scale interventions and neighborhood nodes could help activate multiple areas of downtown over time.

While each transformational theme reflected a distinct perspective on downtown's future, several shared themes consistently emerged throughout the process. Participants explored how these approaches could support daily life, strengthen connectivity, encourage economic vitality, and foster a downtown experience that feels more vibrant, inclusive, welcoming, and distinctly Saint Paul.



6 SKETCHES

CoLab participants conceptualized a future downtown by exploring tangible ideas, priorities, and trade-offs, then brought the six transformational ideas for the downtown core to life. See the Transformational Themes starting on Page 22.

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | WonderWalk Corridor
(5th Street Activation) | Identity and brand expressed physically through strengthened east-west spine anchored on 5th Street. |
| 2 | Perforated Corridors
& Always-On District | Block-by-block activation through small-scale retail, density, and distinctive corridor identities. |
| 3 | Constellation Framework | A connected network of bright nodes and corridors that link existing assets into a discoverable urban constellation. |
| 4 | Central Square
(Density-Driven Core) | A four-block catalytic neighborhood where density, mixed-use, and public space function as the economic engine. |
| 5 | Green Street on Cedar | Transform Cedar into a climate-adaptive green street anchored by an activated public space. |
| 6 | St. Paul's Central Square
15-Minute World | Reimagine two catalytic blocks as a dense, mixed-use, four-season civic heart. |

Closing reflections

At the conclusion of the Reimagine CoLab, participants shared reflections on both the process and the ideas that had emerged. While perspectives varied, there was a clear sense that the CoLab process had created meaningful space for collaboration and new ways of thinking about downtown.

Participants highlighted the value of bringing together diverse perspectives, building on community input, and collectively working through ideas. The Reimagine CoLab reinforced the importance of continued engagement and partnership as downtown Saint Paul moves forward.

The ideas and scenarios developed during the Reimagine CoLab do not represent a single solution. Instead, they offer a set of possibilities and directions that can inform future planning, investment, and collaboration. The following section highlights the scenario directions that emerged through this work.







Future Directions for Downtown Saint Paul

“Transforming the core” was a central component of the Reimagine CoLab Experience. CoLab participants translated their ideas and aspirations into more defined directions for the future of downtown Saint Paul.

Building on earlier vision-setting conversations and exploratory activities, participants imagined how downtown Saint Paul could evolve through different approaches to activity, investment, public space, connectivity, and redevelopment. These ideas were not intended as final plans or fixed proposals. Instead, they represent a range of possible directions designed to explore how different strategies and growth patterns could shape the downtown experience in the years ahead.

Across the Reimagine CoLab, several distinct yet interconnected approaches emerged. While each reflects a different perspective on downtown’s future, all were grounded in recurring themes surfaced through public engagement and collaborative dialogue, including the importance of walkability, everyday activity, public space, connectivity, and a downtown that feels more vibrant, welcoming, and active throughout the day and evening.

Transformational Themes

Across the three Reimagine CoLab cohorts, several consistent themes emerged regarding the future evolution of downtown Saint Paul. While participants explored a wide range of ideas and possibilities, many conversations converged around three distinct yet interconnected approaches to transformation.

The following pages introduce these transformational themes and include spatial diagrams that illustrate how each approach could shape the organization, experience, connectivity, and activity of the downtown core over time.

- ★ Civic Heart Transformation
- ★ Corridor-Driven Transformation
- ★ Ecosystem Transformation



Civic Heart Transformation

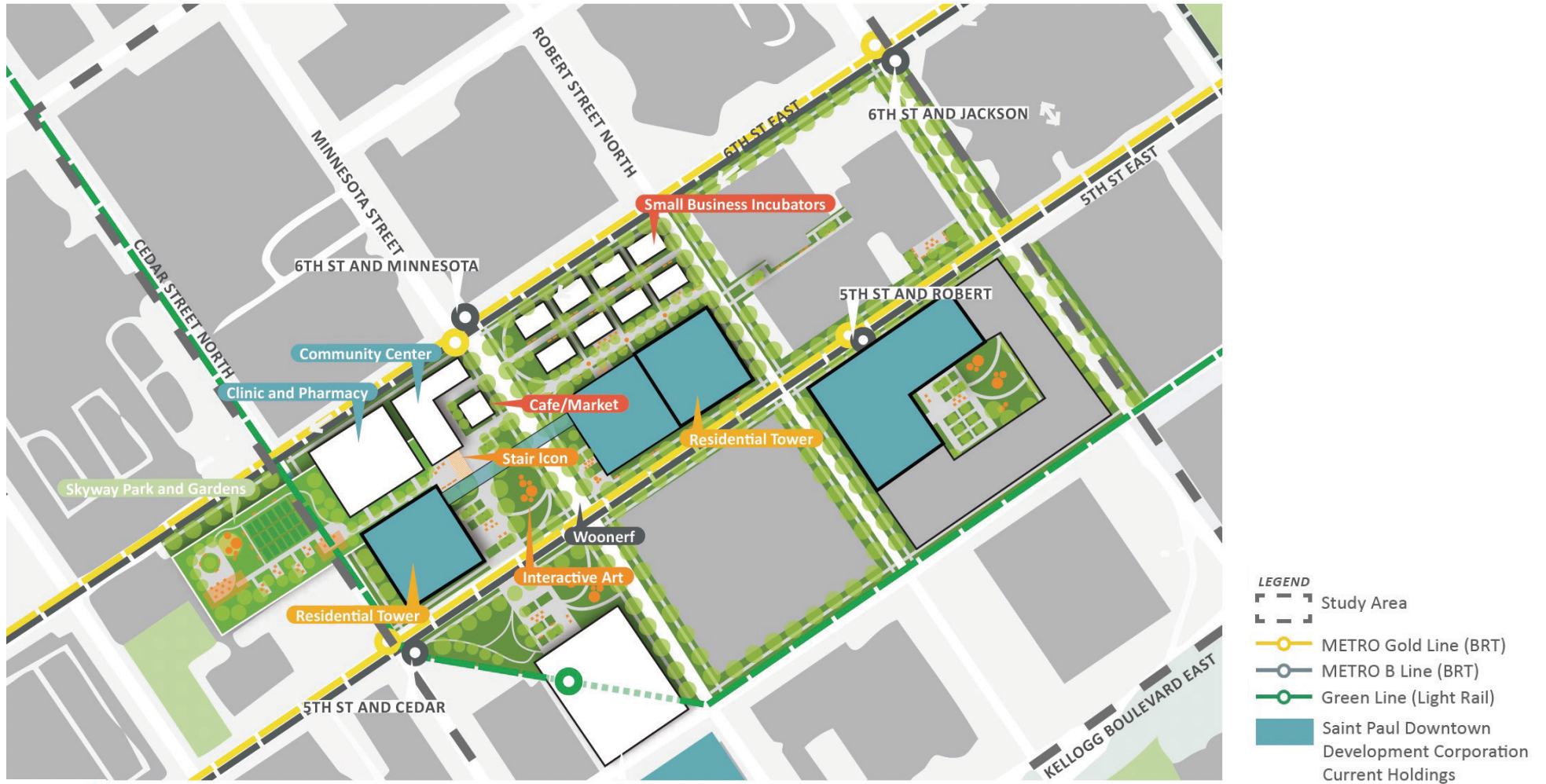
The effort to Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul begins where the Saint Paul Downtown Alliance has the greatest ability to act. The Downtown Development Corporation, an affiliate of the Alliance, has acquired several buildings near Central Station that have struggled in the market but occupy strategically important sites. While these properties represent past challenges, they also present a unique opportunity to catalyze new energy in the area often referred to as the “Donut Hole” of downtown.

The Civic Heart Theme builds on the idea that Central Station should function as a welcoming gateway into downtown Saint Paul. The Downtown Development Corporation owns the Alliance Bank Center and maintains functional control of the U.S. Bank Center, positioning these properties as anchors for future transformation. Centered around these sites, this theme envisions a coordinated approach that introduces new green spaces, mixed-use development with a strong emphasis on increasing residential density, and affordable commercial spaces that support both everyday needs and exploratory retail. It also imagines a new green space at the skyway level, connected to the street by a grand staircase that creates a dramatic vertical connection between the public realm and Saint Paul’s skyway system.

Along with a cohesive design language for the public realm, these investments can help restore activity, strengthen identity, and reestablish this area as the civic heart of downtown Saint Paul.



Civic Heart Transformation



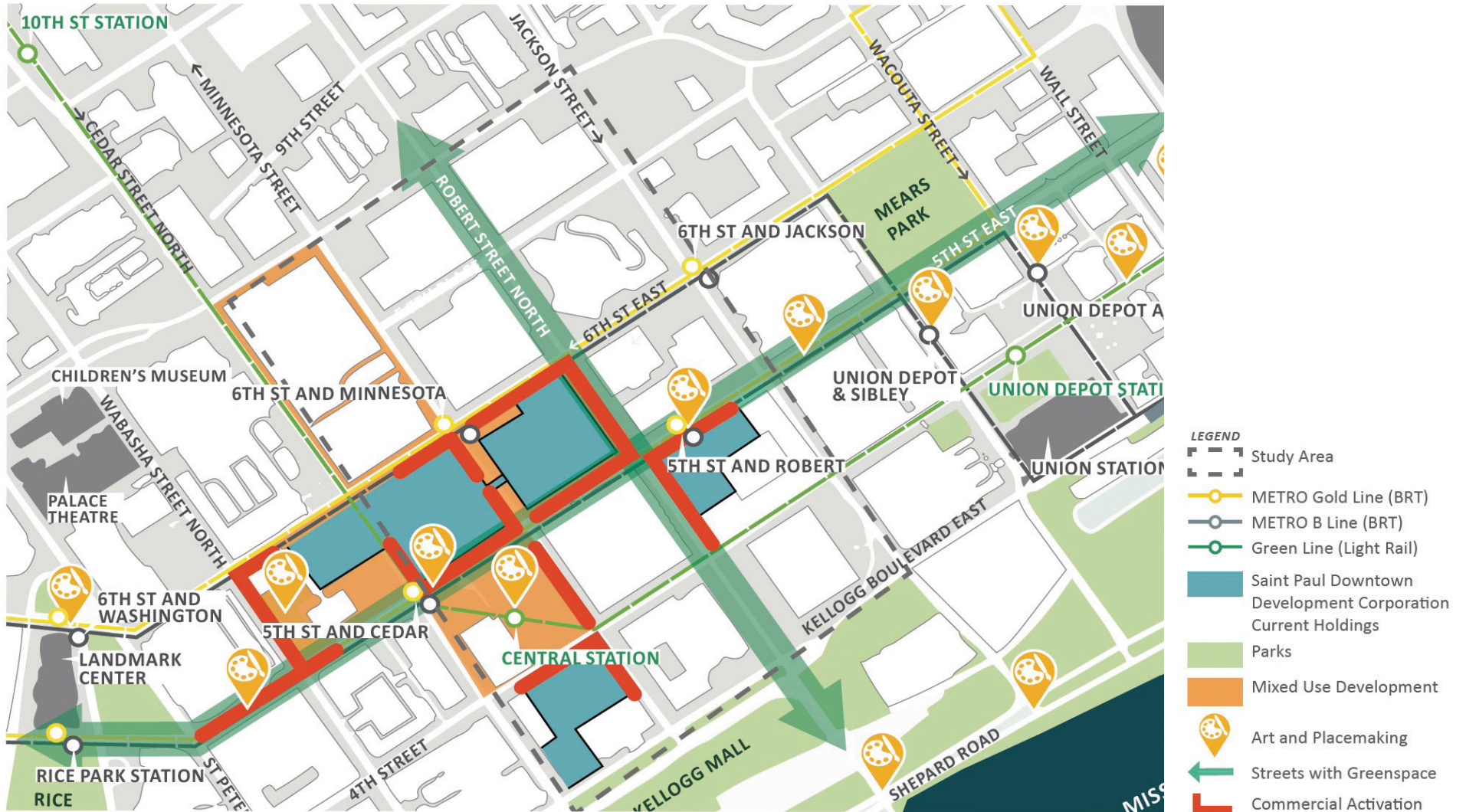
Corridor-Driven Transformation

Building on the Civic Heart Theme, the Corridor Theme focuses on strengthening one of downtown Saint Paul's most important connections: 5th Street. This corridor links some of the city's most beloved public spaces and destinations, connecting Rice Park and Mears Park while also serving as a primary route between major venues such as CHS Field and Grand Casino Arena. Despite these anchors, the experience of moving along the corridor today does not fully reflect the importance of the places it connects.

The Corridor Theme imagines 5th Street as a vibrant spine that encourages people to move through and experience all parts of downtown. Streetscape improvements would create a more comfortable and engaging pedestrian environment through wider sidewalks, additional greenery, and a network of small public spaces that extend the presence of nearby parks into the corridor itself. Public art, temporary installations, and storefront activations would help create moments of interest along the street, encouraging people to pause, explore, and linger. Retail and ground-floor activity are also central to the vision. The corridor would support small shops, cafés, and local businesses that bring energy to the street and reinforce downtown as a destination. Together, these improvements would transform 5th Street into a walkable cultural corridor where art, entertainment venues, and everyday activity come together to create a continuous and memorable downtown experience.



Corridor-Driven Transformation



Ecosystem Transformation

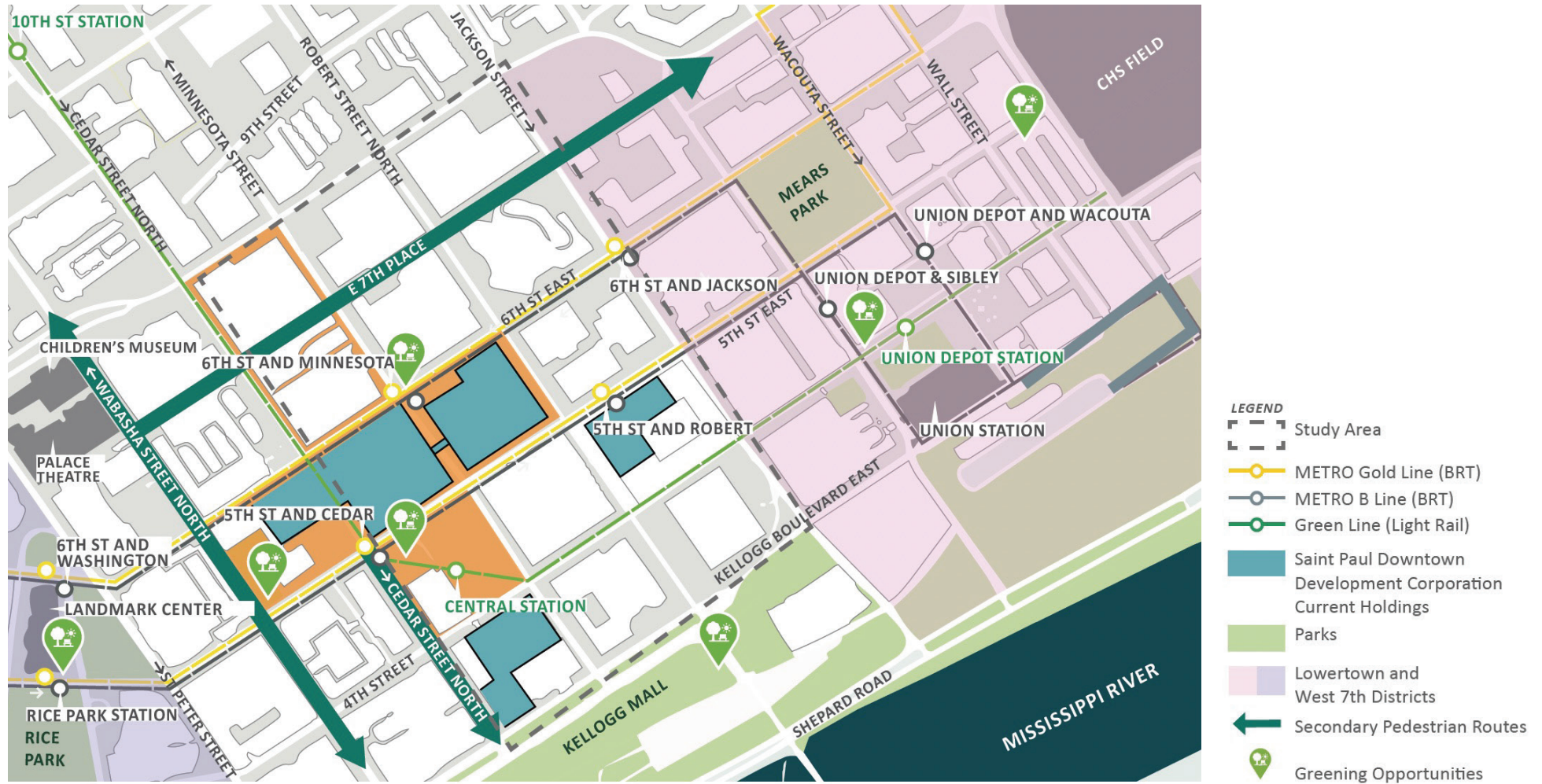
The Ecosystem Theme describes how the transformation of the Core can begin to influence other parts of downtown Saint Paul. While the Civic Heart and Corridor themes focus on catalytic public investments, this theme anticipates the broader response from private property owners across downtown. As early projects demonstrate success, additional sites can gradually contribute to a more vibrant and interconnected downtown through private investment, including expanded residential development and stronger small commercial corridors.

The theme also proposes 7th Place as a pedestrian priority route and highlights Wabasha Street and Cedar Street south of 5th as important north–south connections linking the Mississippi Riverfront to the northern parts of downtown.

As momentum builds, property owners are expected to respond by introducing new street-level retail, improving building frontages, and contributing to streetscape enhancements such as landscaping, lighting, and public art. Over time, these incremental investments extend the energy of downtown’s strongest districts, including the West 7th Street business district, Lowertown, the Capitol Area, and the emerging residential areas near I-94.



Ecosystem Transformation



Common ideas and opportunities

While each transformational theme presents a distinct approach, they are not mutually exclusive. Several priorities were common across CoLabs.

Connections between destinations — whether through corridors, public spaces, or networks — were seen as essential to creating a more cohesive downtown experience. Participants also highlighted the importance of increasing residential presence, supporting small businesses, and investing in the public realm to make downtown more welcoming and active throughout the day and year.

The three transformational themes provide a set of directions that can be combined or adapted over time and can inform future planning and investment decisions, rather than a single prescribed path forward.





Themes Across the Reimagine Process

Across public engagement activities and the Reimagine CoLab experience, several consistent themes emerged through participant dialogue, collaboration, and exploration about the future of downtown Saint Paul.

These themes highlight shared priorities and the conditions participants believe are essential to creating a more active, connected, resilient, and welcoming downtown.

Downtown as a Neighborhood for Everyday Life

Participants consistently described a future where downtown functions as a true neighborhood. This includes a greater mix of housing, services, and amenities that support daily life — not only for visitors, but for people who live and spend time downtown every day.

In this vision, downtown becomes a place where people can meet their daily needs, build connections, and experience a sense of belonging. Increasing the number of residents in the core was seen as essential to creating consistent activity and supporting local businesses over time.

A More Connected, Walkable Downtown Experience

A second theme focused on connectivity and movement. Participants emphasized the importance of making downtown easier to navigate, more intuitive to explore, and more inviting for pedestrians.

This includes strengthening connections between key destinations, improving wayfinding, and creating streets and corridors that encourage people to move through downtown on foot. Rather than isolated pockets of activity, participants envisioned a more continuous and cohesive experience, where each block contributes to a sense of discovery and engagement.



Public space as the foundation of community life

Public spaces were consistently identified as central to downtown's future. Participants described parks, plazas, and gathering places as essential elements of a vibrant downtown, supporting both everyday use and larger events.

These spaces were envisioned as welcoming, flexible, and active throughout the year. From informal gathering to cultural programming, public spaces serve as shared environments where people can connect, relax, and participate in community life.

Reflecting Saint Paul's identity and diversity

A strong theme across engagement and the Reimagine CoLab was the importance of reflecting the full diversity of Saint Paul in the downtown experience. Participants emphasized the need for spaces, businesses, and programming that represent a wide range of cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives.

This includes both physical spaces and cultural expression — from public art to events to everyday interactions. A downtown that feels welcoming and representative of the broader community was seen as essential to its long-term success.

Supporting small businesses and local entrepreneurship

Participants highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for small businesses and local entrepreneurs to thrive downtown. This includes reducing barriers to entry, supporting a diversity of business types, and creating spaces where local ideas and cultural expression can be visible.

Small-scale retail, markets, and pop-up activations were seen as important tools for bringing energy to downtown streets and creating a more dynamic and inclusive economy.

Building on what already exists

Finally, participants emphasized that downtown Saint Paul has significant assets to build on. Historic architecture, the Mississippi River, established parks, and cultural institutions all contribute to the city's identity.

Rather than starting from scratch, the opportunity lies in strengthening and connecting these existing elements. By building on what is already present, downtown can evolve in a way that feels authentic to Saint Paul while creating new experiences and opportunities.



CoLab Voices



"We want Saint Paul to thrive."

Reimagine CoLab participant, community leader

"Think not just about today, but what this will be like a generation from now."

Reimagine CoLab participant, public sector



"Downtown should be a place where people can just be – not just come for something specific."

Public engagement participant

"We need more reasons for people to stay – not just visit, but stay."

Reimagine CoLab participant, business community

"It has to feel welcoming to everyone – not just certain groups."

Public engagement participant



"We already have so many great assets. The opportunity is to connect them and make them easier to experience."

Reimagine CoLab participant, design/placemaking field

"Small businesses and local entrepreneurs should be visible and supported downtown."

Public engagement participant

"The river, the parks, the architecture – those are the things that make Saint Paul unique."

Reimagine CoLab participant, resident

"We need activity throughout the day – not just at events or during work hours."

Reimagine CoLab participant, stakeholder

"People should be able to move easily and discover something new on every block."

Public engagement participant

These voices reflect a shared desire for a downtown that is more connected, more active, and more reflective of the people and communities that make up Saint Paul. They also highlight the importance of continuing to listen, engage, and build on these perspectives as the work moves forward.



Visualizing a More Connected Downtown

Reimagining Downtown Saint Paul CoLab

***participants envisioned
strengthening everyday
experiences downtown***

while also rethinking how the core can better support culture, community life, economic resilience, mobility, housing, and public life.

The following renderings depict a downtown that prioritizes walkability, public life, local business activity, and stronger connections between destinations and neighborhoods.

They also demonstrate how strategic investments in streets, corridors, ground-floor activation, mobility, and the public realm could support a more active and people-centered urban environment that feels distinctly Saint Paul.

The visualizations show opportunities for expanded pedestrian and bicycle connectivity, small business activity, public gathering spaces, green infrastructure, and stronger connections between the street level and skyway system. Collectively, they offer a glimpse into how coordinated investment, design, and civic collaboration could help shape the future evolution of downtown Saint Paul.

5th Street Promenade and Minnesota Street



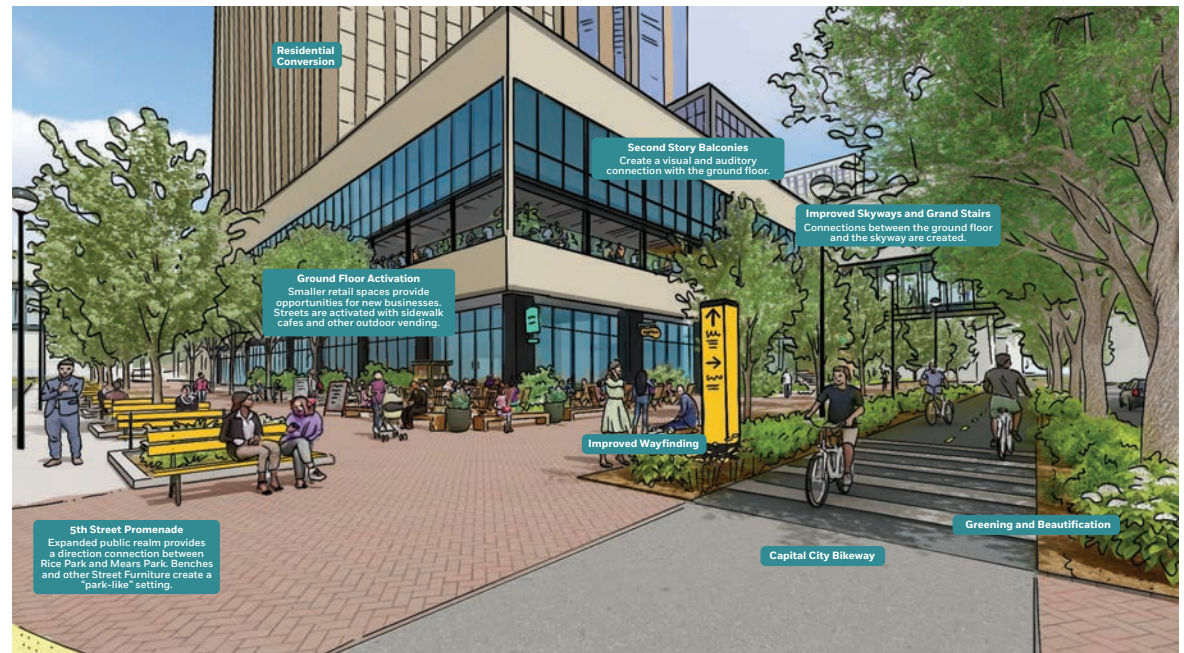
Market Row and Pedestrian Alley



VISUALIZING TRANSFORMATION

5th Street Promenade and Minnesota Street

This rendering illustrates a reimagined 5th Street as a vibrant, green, pedestrian-oriented promenade that strengthens downtown's core as a connected urban destination. Expanded public realm improvements create a continuous, park-like experience linking key destinations, including Mears and Rice Parks, while enhanced landscaping, seating, and wayfinding improve comfort, orientation, and year-round usability. Ground-floor storefronts are reconfigured into smaller, more flexible retail spaces that support local entrepreneurship, outdoor dining, and street-level activity, while second-story balconies and improved skyway connections create stronger visual and physical connections between the ground floor and skyway levels. Together with the residential conversion of the Alliance Bank Tower and integration of the Capital City Bikeway, the corridor becomes a mixed-use destination that supports living, working, recreation, and cultural activity throughout the day and evening.



VISUALIZING TRANSFORMATION

Market Row and Pedestrian Alley

This rendering envisions a transformed mid-block corridor as an active public gathering space that blends mobility, commerce, and community life. A new network of pedestrian alleys, raised crossings, and improved wayfinding creates safer and more intuitive connections between downtown destinations while prioritizing people over vehicles. New pavilion structures along “Market Row” provide space for small businesses, restaurants, community-serving uses, and entrepreneurial incubation, creating opportunities for local economic development and cultural expression. Street vendors, public seating, public art, and abundant landscaping activate the corridor and support everyday social interaction, while the Capital City Bikeway and enhanced green infrastructure improve multimodal connectivity and environmental performance. A new grand stair strengthens the connection between street level, the skyways, and an elevated skypark, reinforcing a downtown experience that is both memorable and distinctly Saint Paul.



Looking Ahead

The Reimagine Downtown

Saint Paul initiative reflects a

significant investment of time,

creativity, collaboration, and

shared stewardship

from community members, stakeholders, and partners across the city. The ideas and future directions explored through this process provide a foundation for continued collaboration, investment, and action to help shape a more vibrant, connected, and inclusive downtown Saint Paul.

This report is not intended to serve as a final plan or prescriptive roadmap. Instead, it captures a set of themes and future possibilities that can help inform ongoing planning, investment, collaboration, and decision-making related to downtown Saint Paul's evolution.

Throughout the Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul process, several important areas of focus consistently emerged. These include:

- ★ strengthening connections between destinations
- ★ supporting residential growth and everyday activity
- ★ investing in the public realm
- ★ improving mobility and accessibility, and
- ★ creating opportunities for small businesses, entrepreneurs, and cultural activity.

Together, these priorities reflect both community aspirations and broader shifts shaping the future of downtowns nationwide.

The work ahead will require continued collaboration across public, private, philanthropic, civic, and community sectors. Just as importantly, it will require sustained engagement with the people who live in, work in, visit, and experience downtown every day. The future of downtown Saint Paul will be shaped not by any single project or organization, but through long-term partnership, shared stewardship, and a collective commitment to creating a downtown that serves the broader community.

As downtown Saint Paul continues to evolve, the ideas generated through Reimagine Downtown Saint Paul offer a shared foundation for future action and collaboration. By building on these insights — and maintaining a focus on connection, inclusivity, vitality, and everyday life — there is an opportunity to shape a downtown that is more resilient, welcoming, vibrant, and distinctly Saint Paul for generations to come.







Join us as we continue to move from
VISION TO ACTION!

Saint Paul Downtown Alliance

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