

Downtown Commercial Historic District Public Realm Vision Plan

Case For Action
Summer 2025

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For the Love of Historic Places

This public realm plan aims to celebrate historic landmarks and how the preservation of these places create unique public realm experiences.



For the Love of Historic Places

The Downtown Commercial Historic District has the potential to act as a hub connecting unique places throughout Downtown. It is the collective buildings within this district, the exterior spaces in-between and around them, and how they interact with each other that creates this "historic district". Preserving the historic character of this special place enhances the public realm and streetlife of Downtown Rochester.

The district's well-preserved early 20th-century architecture, with its detailed brick façades, large display windows, and human-scale proportions, creates a welcoming streetscape that encourages pedestrian activity and community interaction. These historic buildings house a mix of local shops, restaurants, and offices, supporting a diverse and resilient downtown economy.

Historic places serve as tangible reminders of a city's cultural richness and layered history. Whether showcasing distinctive architectural styles, tied to significant events, or related to the development and

cultural characteristics of the City, these structures allow both visitors and longtime residents to experience the visual and cultural narrative of a place. Preserving and reusing older buildings helps maintain a sense of continuity and identity, grounding a city in its heritage while reinforcing its unique character.

Old Buildings Support Diversity

Old buildings often have a mix of uses, which can create more vibrant and interesting neighborhoods. Old buildings are often located in areas with good walkability, which can encourage social interaction and community engagement. Old buildings also provide a sense of place and identity, which can be important for attracting residents and businesses.

Old Buildings are Regenerative

Reusing existing buildings is a sustainable practice that reduces waste and energy consumption. Old buildings can be adapted to meet changing needs, making them a more flexible and resilient asset.



This is a Case for Action

Creating a vision plan for the public realm in Rochester's Downtown Historic District is essential to guide thoughtful, inclusive, and cohesive development that honors the area's rich heritage while addressing the needs of a changing district as well as a growing and diversifying population. As the district evolves, a clear vision will help balance historic preservation with modern functionality—ensuring that streets, sidewalks, parks, and gathering spaces are accessible, welcoming, and vibrant for all.

A public realm vision plan provides a framework for aligning future investments with community values, supporting small businesses, enhancing walkability, and fostering cultural expression. It also ensures that the district remains not just a place of the past, but a dynamic center of civic life that reflects Rochester's identity, diversity, quirks, character, and aspirations for the future.

This Case for Action is essentially a holistic analysis of the complexities of the existing conditions and opportunities that lie within the public realm of the Downtown Commercial Historic District. The Case for Action is broken into three parts:

1. The Story: What narrative is the Rochester Downtown Commercial Historic District telling?

2. The Energy: What is the exciting energy of the Rochester Downtown Commercial Historic District?

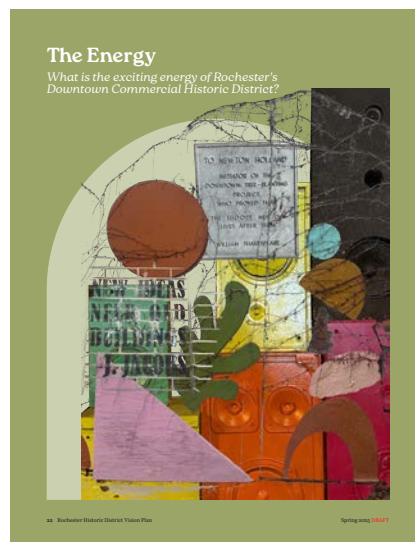
and

3. The Context: What place does the Rochester Downtown Commercial Historic District hold in the greater downtown fabric?

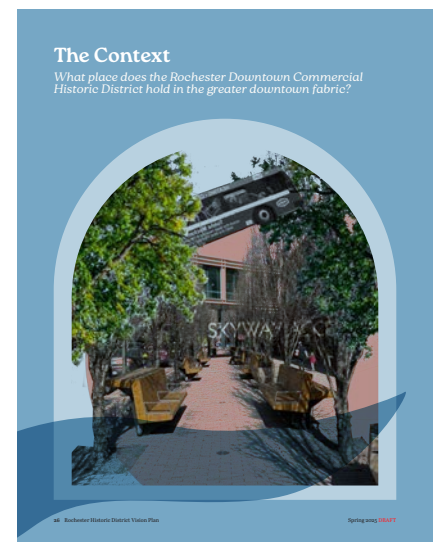
In these storytelling parts, we will understand why this district is important, from the connections it makes, to the stories it holds. These indicators will build our case for why a public realm vision plan is needed.



Part 1: The Story



Part 2: The Energy



Part 3: The Context

Equity and Inclusion in the Public Realm

Long before the establishment of Rochester, Minnesota, the land was home to Indigenous peoples, primarily the Dakota (Sioux), Ojibway, and Winnebago Nations who lived throughout the region for centuries. The Zumbro River and surrounding prairies played a vital role in their way of life. Treaties in the 19th century, including the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux in 1851, led to the forced cession of vast Indigenous lands and the displacement of Native communities from the area. Despite this, Indigenous presence and influence continue today, as Native American individuals and families remain part of Rochester's cultural landscape, working to preserve their heritage and advocate for recognition and inclusion within the community.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Rochester's population has been predominantly of European descent, with BIPOC communities in the minority; however, the city's diversity steadily increased through the 21st century. Buildings within and around the Downtown Commercial Historic District reflect the complex history of both discrimination faced by non-European communities and their resilience in the face of adversity. Notably, Rochester's first civil rights march took place along Broadway Avenue in 1963, marking a significant moment in the city's pursuit of equity. Buildings in Downtown appear in the Green Book. George W. Gibbs Jr., the first African American to step foot in Antarctica, found his home working at IBM in Rochester for many decades after his expedition.

Underrepresented communities have played vital roles as entrepreneurs, leaders, and organizers, contributing meaningfully to Rochester's social and cultural fabric. It is imperative that this Vision Plan acknowledges the role that public space has played in injustice and discrimination, and that this plan must actively and intentionally make recommendations that result in inclusive and equitable outcomes.

Being intentional about inclusion in the public realm is essential. Public spaces shape how people experience and interact with their communities. Inclusive design and planning ensure that everyone—regardless of race, age, ability, gender, or socioeconomic status—feels welcome, safe, and represented. Without intentionality, public spaces can inadvertently exclude marginalized groups, reinforcing systemic inequities and limiting access to civic life. Inclusive public realms foster a stronger sense of belonging, encourage diverse social interaction, and support equitable access to resources and opportunities. By consciously creating spaces that reflect and serve all members of a community, cities can build more resilient, just, and connected societies.



Case for Action Summary

This Case for Action presents a comprehensive case for revitalizing the public realm of Rochester's Downtown Commercial Historic District based on the importance of the district's heritage. Designated as a local historic landmark in 2024, this three-block area contains 33 buildings, most of which contribute significantly to the district's historic character. The district encapsulates Rochester's development from a river town in the 1870s to a regional hub for commerce and medicine, particularly through the growth of the Mayo Clinic.

The plan divides the area's history into three key development phases—its emergence as a bustling 19th-century trade center, transformation following a devastating 1883 tornado, and eventual commercial decline in the mid-20th century due to suburban expansion. Despite this decline, the district retained vitality due to medical tourism and remains rich with buildings that reflect diverse architectural and social histories.

This public realm analysis reveals that while the district's buildings are well preserved, its streets, sidewalks, and public amenities lack coherence, accessibility,

and a distinct identity. Comfort and aesthetic amenities are inconsistent, and public gathering spaces are limited. There is great opportunity to enhance the district's environmental character, social value, accessibility, safety, and storytelling through better design and infrastructure.

Strategically, the vision plan for the public realm should seek to align with broader downtown development efforts, including the Destination Medical Center (DMC) initiative and related small area plans. The findings in this Case for Action underscore the importance of integrating the historic district into the city's future growth by improving walkability, fostering small businesses, and connecting with nearby neighborhoods and public spaces, current and future.

Overall, the vision plan should seek a balanced approach—preserving the district's historic essence while adapting to modern urban needs. Topics that could be considered include strategic zoning, design sensitivity, and community engagement to ensure the district remains a dynamic, inclusive, and integral part of Rochester's urban landscape.



The Story

What narrative is Rochester's Downtown Commercial Historic District telling?



Historic Character & History

Historic Designation

In 2024, the City of Rochester, Minnesota designated the Downtown Commercial Historic District as a local historic landmark. This decision followed a public hearing and an updated study that highlighted the area's historical significance. The district includes about three city blocks, bounded roughly by South Broadway Avenue on the east, 1st Avenue Southwest on the west, 2nd Street Southwest to the north, and 4th Street Southwest to the south. Within this area are 33 properties, 28 of which contribute to the historic character of the district.

Although the designated area represents only a portion of Rochester's original commercial core, it contains the most intact grouping of historic buildings from the district's period of significance, which spans from 1870 to 1962. Many other historic buildings were lost in the late 20th and early 21st centuries due to redevelopment. While architectural styles

of the buildings vary greatly, this pattern is by no means distinct to Rochester, and the buildings in the district are united by a physical development pattern that is typical of Midwestern commercial centers. Characterized by street-facing primary facades, zero lot line construction, and rectangular block plats, the streetscape reflects a longstanding pattern of civic and commercial development in Rochester. This shared historic context and spatial organization are what qualified the area as a cohesive historic district.

Eras of Development

1870-1889: A Growing River Town

The development of downtown Rochester was closely tied to its emergence as a regional hub in the mid-19th century. After the town was platted in 1854 by settlers from upstate New York, early infrastructure—such as bridges over the Zumbro River and the arrival of the Winona and St. Peter Railroad—accelerated its growth. By the



Postcard depicting Broadway Avenue South circa 1890. Source: City of Rochester

1860s and 1870s, Rochester's downtown had begun to take shape as a commercial and civic center, supported by a growing population, milling industries, and its designation as the Olmsted County seat. Booster literature from the era noted Rochester's rapid expansion, and by the 1890s, Broadway Avenue had become a bustling main street lined with a variety of retail establishments and service providers.

The buildings designed and constructed in this period are characterized by one- and two-story masonry structures featuring flat roofs, punched upper-story windows, and period revival detailing. These buildings are densely situated in contiguous rows reflecting the architectural pattern common in Minnesota's southern river towns. They are significant for their historical associations with Rochester's early commercial growth and represent 19th-century small-city commercial architecture. Together, they tell the story of how Rochester evolved from a small settlement into a thriving trade and cultural center in southeastern Minnesota.



The I.O.O.F Lodge #13 building was built in 1906.
Source: Alan Calavano

1890-1945: Evolution of the Commercial Core

During the late 19th and early 20th century, Rochester's downtown commercial core evolved significantly, spurred by both tragedy and transformation. The devastating 1883 tornado cleared large swaths of the original downtown, setting the stage for a period of reconstruction and reinvention. In the wake of this disaster, the founding of Saint Marys Hospital by the Sisters of Saint Francis and the Mayo family marked the beginning of Rochester's rise as a national center for medicine. As the Mayo Clinic rapidly expanded—culminating in the construction of purpose-built medical facilities like the 1914 clinic building and the iconic 1928 Plummer Building—the city's physical and economic landscape changed. Although these landmark medical buildings were located just outside the commercial district, their presence catalyzed broader downtown growth.

Architecturally, this period introduced a shift from the uniform, multipurpose brick storefronts that had previously defined the commercial district to a more varied and specialized urban fabric. While some infill buildings continued the pattern of simple, adaptable one- and two-story structures along Broadway and 1st Avenue, others took the form of larger, freestanding commercial and institutional buildings, often more distinctive in both form and function. These structures contrasted with the earlier contiguous blocks, signaling a new phase in the architectural development of Rochester's downtown—one that reflected both its economic diversification and growing prominence as a regional medical destination.

1946-1963: Decline of Downtown's Growth

In the decades following World War II, downtown Rochester's commercial core experienced a period of relative stasis. While other American cities saw widespread decline in their central business districts during the 1950s and 60s, Rochester maintained a level of vitality thanks to the continued prominence of the Mayo Clinic. Retail and hospitality businesses in the downtown area shifted to orient more services toward the transient population of clinic visitors rather than relying on regional shoppers. Though new construction within the historic commercial district was limited, a few buildings—such as the Northwestern National Bank and Dayton's Department Store—reflected broader national trends toward modern architecture. These structures embraced midcentury styles, like the International Style, which projected corporate strength and modernity. At the same time, some older buildings received stylistic updates to align with contemporary tastes, trading elaborate revival detailing for

minimalist surfaces and geometric accents.

Despite these efforts to modernize, downtown Rochester eventually faced the same pressures of decentralization that affected urban centers nationwide. The development of strip malls like Miracle Mile (1952) and Northgate (1960), followed by the more ambitious Crossroads Shopping Center (1963) and Apache Mall (1969), drew commerce to the city's periphery. Still, downtown retained its role as a retail district into the early 1960s, bolstered by Mayo Clinic expansions, new hotels, and connectivity through skyways and underground arcades. However, as retail increasingly migrated outward, downtown construction shifted focus from general commerce to service-oriented development closely tied to the clinic. This transition ushered in a new era in which portions of the historic commercial core—particularly along Broadway and 1st Avenue—were razed to accommodate larger-scale medical and hospitality developments, marking the beginning of a physical and functional transformation of Rochester's downtown landscape.



Northwestern National Bank, located at 15-21 2nd Street SW and built in 1957, is an example of the International style of architecture. Source: City of Rochester

Historic Streetscapes

While the street grid pattern remained the same in the historic district from the 1870s through the end of the period of significance in 1962, historic photographs show an evolution of materials and features in the public streetscape. Streets evolved from dirt to masonry pavers to asphalt pavement.

As cars became popular, hitching posts for carriage parking were replaced by parking meters, and the city experimented with automobile parking at the center of the streets as well as parallel and diagonal parking along the curb. Wooden telephone and/or power poles and several iterations of metal street lights are visible on historic photos. Signage was a consistent feature of the district, with flat or projecting wall signs mounted to building façades and occasionally mounted to the roof alongside rooftop flag poles.

A significant change related to streets occurred in 1918, when the city's streets were renamed. As longtime Rochester resident Paul D. Scanlon explains, "the new system used Cartesian coordinates with four quadrants and axial dividing streets at Broadway and the former Fifth Street, now renamed Center Street. Streets are numbered in sequence as a function of distance from the center. North-south streets are called avenues and east-west streets are called streets." Within the historic district, north-south Main Street was renamed 1st Avenue Southwest; east-west College Street was renamed 4th Street and Zumbro Street was renamed 2nd Street.

The District in Context

The story of Rochester's Downtown Commercial Historic District is closely tied to the history of the region as a whole, demonstrating how local, regional, and national trends and historic events shaped the social and design character of the District.

This history is organized into three broad themes:



Economic Development

Focuses on local industry and commercial activities, such as shopping and restaurants.



Public and Civic Life

Highlights the civic and public services within the District, as well as the District entities that shaped entertainment and culture.



People and Stories

Acknowledge on the diversity of voices and long-term cultural anchors within the District.

These themes are discussed in greater detail in the following "Ties to Rochester's History" section. Each contributing historic building within the District is loosely affiliated with a theme, and is noted in the Historic Assets map. The building's name and date of construction can be found on the Historic Building Timeline on pages 9-11 of this document.

Historic Assets

-  Economic Development
-  Public and Civic Life
-  People and Stories

- 1 Columbia Hotel (1858)
- 2 Clausen and Adler Hardware (1870)
- 3 F.J. Paine Company/Palace Block (1873)
- 4 Williams Block (1874)
- 5 Baker and Hanson/The Council Saloon (1875)
- 6 Union National Bank Building (1878)
- 7 C.F. Massey Co. (1880)
- 8 Commercial Building (1884)
- 9 A.J. Bjerring Barbershop/Bjerring Hotel (1884)
- 10 Rochester Egg and Poultry Co. (1884)
- 11 Black's Lunch (1884)
- 12 C.H. Morrill and Son, Wholesale Grocery (1884)
- 13 Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. (1884)
- 14 Holland's Food Shop (1884)
- 15 F.J. Paine Company (1885)
- 16 Bach Music Company (1885)
- 17 F.A. Poole Building (1885)
- 18 Kennedy Building (1888)
- 19 Alley (1900)
- 20 Blakely Building (1902)
- 21 Rochester Commercial Club Building (1904)
- 22 I.O.O.F. Lodge #13 (1906)
- 23 Stebbins Building (1917)
- 24 Olmsted Country Bank and Trust Company (1918)
- 25 Hotel Francis (1918)
- 26 Riverside Building (1919)
- 27 Lawler Laundry Building Façade (1920)
- 28 City Hall (1931)
- 29 Dayton's Department Store (1954)
- 30 Northwestern National Bank of Rochester (1957)
- 31 Parking Lot (circa 1960)
- 32 318 Commons (2011)
- 33 The Hue Apartments (2020)



Data Sources: City of Rochester, Rochester Public Works, New History Historic Analysis

Summer 2025

Historic Asset Mapping

1858 1 **Columbia Hotel**
330 Broadway Avenue South

1870 2 **Clausen and Adler Hardware**
307 Broadway Avenue South

1873 3 **F.J. Paine Company/Palace Block**
311-313 Broadway Avenue South
The F. J. Paine Company, a long-time local furniture dealer, operated at this location from 1902 until 2007.

1874 4 **Williams Block**
304 1st Avenue Southwest

This store was established by Dennis Hogan Williams (1832-1911), who arrived in Rochester in 1868 and began a farm implement business first in partnership with J. Franklin Van Dooser and later on his own. He was an alderman and mayor of the city from 1873-1875 and 1878-1888. His son Frank E. Williams (1860-1932) worked alongside his father at the firm before selling the business in 1912. In his will, Williams left his property to the city for the purpose of developing and maintaining playgrounds; the F. E. Williams Trust continues to exist for this purpose today. The Williams store reflects Rochester's history as a community founded on agriculture.

1875 5 **Baker and Hanson/The Council Saloon**
319-321 Broadway Avenue South

1878 6 **Union National Bank Building**
4 3rd Street Southwest

1880 7 **C.F. Massey Co.**
202 1st Avenue Southwest (also 20 2nd Street Southwest)

Between 1883 and 1901, Dr. William Worrall Mayo, Dr. Charles Horace Mayo, Dr. Williams James Mayo, Dr. Augustus W. Stinchfield, and Dr. Christopher Graham had their medical offices at 202 1st Avenue Southwest. The doctors' offices, consulting rooms, and operating rooms were located on the first floor, while the second floor housed their medical laboratories. In 1901, the doctors moved their offices to the Masonic Temple at the northwest corner of this same intersection. From 1912 until 1991, the building was occupied by C. F. Massey, an upscale department store.

1884 8 **Commercial Building***
16-20 3rd Street Southwest

Wong's Café was a well-known Rochester dining establishment was founded in 1952 by brothers Neil and Ben Wong and their wives Poya and Mae Wong. The restaurant was located at 20 3rd street until 1983, when it moved to the Union National Bank Building at 4 3rd Street Southwest and served traditional Cantonese as well as American food.

9 **A.J. Bjerring Barbershop/Bjerring Hotel**
318 Broadway Avenue South

**Building does not contribute to Historic District status.*



1870-1889 A Growing River Town

- 1884** **10 Rochester Egg and Poultry Co.**
320-322 Broadway Avenue South

Between 1891 and 1970, 320 Broadway was occupied by several businesses, including the Crescent Creamery, W. J. Eaton Egg Company, the Rochester Egg & Poultry Co., and Stoppel's Eggs, Poultry, and Seed Company (later known as Stoppel's Feed and Seed). Stoppel's sold farm supplies such as seed corn, field seed, fertilizer, and animal feeds, and eventually expanded into items for urban residents like pet food and lawn supplies. They continued at this location until at least 1974.

- 11 Black's Lunch**
323 Broadway Avenue South

- 12 C.H. Morrill and Son, Wholesale Grocery**
324 Broadway Avenue South

- 13 Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.**
326-328 Broadway Avenue South

- 14 Holland's Food Shop**
216 1st Avenue Southwest

Holland's Food Shop moved into this building in 1931. Founded by Ernest Holland in 1907 and taken over by his son Newton in 1925, the grocery store became a cafeteria and art gallery in the 1930s or '40s, showcasing local artists and playing pipe organ radio broadcasts for patrons.



- 1885** **15 F.J. Paine Company**
309 Broadway Avenue South

- 16 Bach Music Company**
315-317 Broadway Avenue South
Beginning in 1948, the Bach Music Co. occupied the building. During its tenure at this location, the business grew to encompass three storefronts and a large auditorium.

- 17 F.A. Poole Building**
325 Broadway Avenue South



- 1888** **18 Kennedy Building**
10 3rd Street Southwest

- 1900** **19 Alley**
214 1st Avenue Southwest

- 1902** **20 Blakely Building**
210 1st Avenue Southwest

- 1904** **21 Rochester Commercial Club Building**
212 1st Avenue Southwest

- 1906** **22 I.O.O.F. Lodge #13**
23 2nd Street Southwest



1890-1945 Commercial Core

1890-1945 Evolution of the Commercial Core

1917 **23** Stebbins Building

220 1st Avenue Southwest

Founded by William H. Knapp after his 1875 arrival in Rochester, China Hall was taken over by his sisters Matie and Nellie in 1890. They hired Winkle in 1903, who bought the business in 1914 and moved it to 220 1st Avenue SW around 1930, where it remained in operation through 1962.

1918 **24** Olmsted County Bank and Trust Company

7 2nd Street Southwest

The Olmsted County Bank and Trust Company purchased 7 2nd Street Southwest from the First State Bank of Rochester in 1936 and continued to occupy it through at least 1962.

25 Hotel Francis

17 4th Street Southwest

The Hotel Francis was constructed in 1918 and represents the booming hospitality industry that developed in Rochester to serve the needs of Mayo Clinic patients and their families.

1919 **26** Riverside Building

400 Broadway Avenue South

1920 **27** Lawler Laundry Building Façade*

14 3rd Street Southwest

(Building constructed 1920, façade relocated from building outside district in 2007).

1931 **28** City Hall

224 1st Avenue Southwest



1954 **29** Dayton's Department Store

195 Broadway Avenue South

Constructed in 1954, this store was the Minneapolis retail giant's first branch store. Dayton's decision to build in downtown Rochester reflects downtown's prominence into the mid-twentieth century, despite the growth of retail development in suburban areas.

1957 **30** Northwestern National Bank of Rochester

15-21 2nd Street Southwest

The Union National Bank moved into the building at 4 3rd Street Southwest in 1875, just a few years after it was incorporated. In 1956, it became the Northwestern National Bank of Rochester and constructed a new building at 21 2nd Street Southwest. The bank building was known for its "Weatherball" icon, which used different colored lighting to provide the weather forecast.

circa 1960 **31** Parking Lot*

corner 4th St and Broadway

2011 **32** 318 Commons*

318 1st Avenue Southwest

2020 **33** The Hue Apartments*

324 1st Avenue Southwest



**Building does not contribute to Historic District status.*

1946-1963 Decline of Downtown's Growth

Ties to Rochester's History

Economic Development

Rochester was a city of westward expansion.

Some of the oldest buildings in the district were built as part of an early pioneer settlement, founded in 1854 as a stop on a stagecoach line from Dubuque, Iowa to St. Paul, MN. Soon after, Rochester developed into a regional urban center connected to Chicago by rail.

Rochester has historically been a leader in agriculture, food production, and distribution.

As a center of transport and with fertile land, settlers started farms, focusing first on wheat production, then dairy, livestock and other crops. Several flour mills, a dairy cooperative, and canning facilities were built, making Rochester a food distribution center, which evolved as technology and scale in farming increased. Businesses in the historic district serviced the farming community.

With simple origins, the Mayo Clinic expanded its influence through partnerships and teaching.

In the 1860s, Dr. William Worrell Mayo opened a medical practice in Rochester, today known as Mayo Clinic, that would grow to become a key part of the city's economy. The Mayo offices were located in the historic district during the late 1800s. In 1883, a devastating tornado, which impacted the historic district, exposed the community's need for a local hospital.

Many local companies innovated and grew within Rochester's downtown.

Schuster Brewery, located adjacent to the historic district, was established in the 1860s and remained in operation until 1922. Other notable companies innovating in tandem with Mayo Clinic at the turn of the twentieth century included the Conley Camera Company and Maass and McAndrew Plumbing and Heating, which diversified their services to support the Mayo Clinic.

Within the district, many businesses have been long-standing tenants of the community

Hundreds of businesses and companies were located in the historic district from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century.

The District lost some of its economic steam as the city expanded outwards in the 20th century.

In the mid-1900's the district faced competition from outlying shopping centers constructed as residential and commercial development spread outward. The establishment of International Business Machines (IBM) in Rochester as a major employer also became a reason for outward expansion of the City.

Public and Civic Life

Rochester's downtown has a strong connection with municipal and county government.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Rochester's elected officials included a mayor and aldermen. The city built two consecutive city halls within the historic district, in 1884 and then 1931. Olmsted County government has also been based in Rochester since the mid-nineteenth century.

The city has high standards for taking care of its citizens through resilient municipal services.

The district represents some of the history of municipal infrastructure and services like fire protection, the postal service, and electric power generation. Below-grade utilities beneath district streets were one of the Great Depression Era public works projects sponsored by federal agencies. Rochester's Franklin Heating Station, just outside the historic district, was notable for its efficient Combined Heat and Power (CHP) system.

Downtown Rochester is the historic central social district for the region.

Downtown Rochester has long been a place for recreation, with theaters, event spaces, and other places of entertainment. The district buildings included social gathering spaces like saloons and meeting halls, and the public realm was used for parades and celebrations, specifically Broadway Avenue.

People and Stories

Rochester is founded on Dakota land and remains a home for Dakota people.

The 1851 Treaties of Mendota and Traverse des Sioux as well as forced removal of the Dakota following the U.S. Dakota War of 1862 provided the premise for the United States government and Euro-Americans to stake claims to land in the Rochester area. Despite this tragic history, the Dakota have persisted in Rochester. During the late twentieth century, the Dakota community established strong organizations to serve the community's needs, preserve Indigenous culture, and educate the public.

Rochester's underrepresented communities, including Black, Asian American, and Native American residents, have included resilient entrepreneurs and community organizers.

Ethnically, the majority of Rochester's residents have been those of European descent and BIPOC residents have been in the minority, though the city's diversity continues to grow into the 21st century. Buildings in and adjacent to the district help to tell the story of both discrimination against and the resilience of non-European communities. The city's first Civil Rights March occurred along Broadway Avenue in 1963.

Mayo clinic contributes to Rochester's international reputation.

By 1978, it was estimated that Mayo visitors from other countries made up between 2 and 4 percent of the clinic's 250,000 annual patient registration, from approximately 70 countries, including Mexico, Spain, and Saudi Arabia.

Public Realm Analysis

Defining the Public Realm

The public realm in the context of the Downtown Commercial Historic District refers to the shared spaces that are accessible to everyone and form the setting for community life. In the district, this includes streets, sidewalks, alleyways, and the features that characterize these spaces that support everyday interactions, movement, rest, and activities. In Rochester, especially with its focus on health and innovation through the Destination Medical Center initiative, the public realm plays a critical role in fostering a welcoming, walkable, and vibrant urban environment. The public realm supports both locals and visitors by encouraging social connection, cultural expression, and economic activity while contributing to the overall quality of life and identity of the city.

The analysis of the current public realm in the district will focus on four categories:

1. Environmental Character
2. Social Value
3. Accessibility and Safety
4. Wayfinding, Signage, and Storytelling



Project team conducting the visual site assessment of the Downtown Commercial Historic District.

Each of these categories will be considered through three lenses:

Quality - How well are the spaces that make up the public realm designed from a durability, maintenance, and aesthetics perspective?

Function - How well are people able to use the public spaces in the district, through passive use, active use, or finding their way through the district?

Impact - How much are the public spaces in the district contributing to a special public realm identity, inclusion, and sense of place?

These lenses will be scored on a scale of 1 through 3, with **1** indicating "in near-term need of significant revisioning and improvement", **2** indicating "in need of some work but is generally sufficient", and **3** indicating "excellent for contributing to the public realm environment".

The following pages provide a breakdown of these public realm categories and lenses, with supporting imagery of the current condition of the public realm. Note that each image is labeled with an icon that correlates with a location map on page 18.



Character

2 Quality

1 Function

1 Impact

Rochester's Downtown Commercial Historic District holds deep history as the original heart of commerce in the city. Today, things have changed a bit, with commercial hubs diversifying throughout Rochester to serve the expanded population. Through the preservation efforts of building owners over time, many historic properties in this district have maintained their historic character, as emphasized in the 2019-2024 Rochester Historic Landmark Eligibility Designation Study. However, beyond the buildings themselves, the public realm leaves much to be desired in the sense of holding a character that is unique to the historic district.

Sense of Place: There is currently no cohesive district-wide identity or character to the Downtown Commercial Historic District. It is unclear where the district boundaries are, and the character of the public realm changes many times even on the same block. One is not sure if they have "arrived", if they are aware that they are in a historic district at all. Looking at precedents within Rochester, including Heart of the City and Discovery Square, there is great opportunity to find the character of the Downtown Commercial Historic District within the public realm.

Materials: Sidewalk materials vary greatly throughout the district, and seem to be dictated by disconnected piecemeal projects completed over time or by individual property owner interventions. Fixed amenities such as benches, planters, and street and sidewalk lighting also vary widely throughout the district.

Scale: Though the historic buildings feel human-scale, surrounding modern development varies in impact on the feeling of being in the district. Large several-story monolithic developments dwarf the buildings in the historic district, impacting the balance and transition between the district and other parts of downtown. On the other hand, some modern development has more successfully contextualized itself within the district, attempting to match scale, materials, and facade style with the general character of the historic structures.

Landscaping: There is no consistent treatment to landscaping within the district. Street verges (planted areas between the sidewalk and roadway) appear in most bump-outs and on most blocks of the district, but show planting success inconsistently, with some verges being heavily planted and some being barren areas of mulch. Raised planters are of varying designs and styles, most likely a result of City-standard and owner/tenant-installed.

Materials - Current examples within the district



1
Various types of concrete are the predominant surface material throughout the district



2
However, some areas within and adjacent to the district boundaries show opportunities to infuse character using the materiality



3
Remnants of different materials indicate different owners, property lines, and eras of change in a rough way



4
Inconsistency in material usage can indicate unorganized improvement efforts and detracts from a unified character



5
Different bench types and colors detract from an overall sense of place and cohesive district character



6
Different lighting styles indicate various eras of improvements implemented without a cohesive district vision

Scale - Current examples within the district



7
Modern development looking across 1st Ave SW from the historic district include full glass facades and overhead masses



8
The historic district buildings seem dwarfed by the several-story nearby BioBusiness Center and parking ramp



9
Though modern, the newer development beginning at 316 Broadway and north acknowledges the district's scale and style

Landscaping - Current examples within the district



10
Wide plant beds offer opportunity for lush landscaping, but have degraded into areas of wood mulch



11
Mature street trees provide a comfortable pedestrian experience, but are not consistently present throughout the district



12
Even when dormant, landscape plantings add texture and softness to the public realm

Social Value

2 Quality

1 Function

1 Impact

The social value lens evaluates the influence of the public spaces in the district on social interactions, economic activity, and overall community vibrancy. Does the public realm in the Downtown Commercial Historic District promote opportunities for people to connect and interact in public spaces?

Interactions: In general, there are no public gathering spaces available for folks occupying or visiting the district unless you are a customer of a business who has elected to set up an outdoor sidewalk cafe. Much of the public realm is a pass-through space, facilitating movement through the district but not necessarily encouraging visitors to stop, rest, and gather. Benches throughout the district appear where there is enough space on the sidewalks, but generally face traffic or are singularly placed. Heart of the City and Discovery Square showcase successful ways to encourage social interactions through seating and other comfort and entertainment elements that can inform the historic district's future public realm.



Single benches facing non-social elements, located near trash receptacles and buzzing utilities isn't the best set up for a meaningful social interaction

Economic activity: The business makeup of the district is diverse and vibrant. From new start-up shops to long-standing businesses and everything in-between, the district is a happening place where you can come to enjoy a meal, visit an art shop, purchase some antiques, or conduct business in one of the many office buildings. This economic vibrancy is in part largely due to the unique character that the historic structures inherently hold, and the public realm should reflect this vibrancy by supporting the various businesses to not only attract new customers, but provide a place to grow and thrive economically.



Small, local businesses are thriving in the district, drawing visitors both locally and from out of town for their unique charm and diverse offerings.



Accessibility and Safety

- 2 Quality
- 2 Function
- 2 Impact

Looking at the accessibility and safety of an outdoor public realm is critical in ensuring that people feel like they can trust being in the place, feel like they belong, and that they can safely move through the district. Considerations include visibility, lighting, Americans with Disabilities Act compliant designs, and inclusive practices.

Especially in Rochester, where people from all over the world come for medical support just blocks from the Downtown Commercial Historic District, accessible and inclusive spaces are imperative to do very well in this district.

Some businesses in the historic buildings have an immediate barrier at their front door with a step up to enter their space. Sometimes folks in need of a more accessible transition are required to go to the rear of the building, through an alleyway that is currently not an inviting or comfortable space to be. Some businesses have addressed this issue by adding a short ramp, which a more thorough assessment of compliant accessible grade should be conducted.



Steps up to businesses are barriers to some, and back-of-house entries feel unsafe and too far a distance to travel

Sidewalks are comfortable and wide throughout the district, allowing for ease of navigating folks passing by, with the exception of along Broadway Ave where the narrow sidewalk and lack of buffer from the busy roadway make feeling safe here challenging.

Sidewalks and streets are well-lit, with light poles and building-mounted lighting supporting a safe evening environment.

Controlled pedestrian crossings and sloped ramps facilitate safer crossings along Broadway Ave, but crossing over 1st Ave along 3rd St is a bit riskier without a controlled or signalled intersection there.



Creating comfortable spaces for folks to pass each other without pinch points or directly along busy roadways improves safety, accessibility, and comfort in the public realm



Crosswalk improvements will lend to a better feeling of safety and comfort crossing roadways

Wayfinding, Signage, and Storytelling

- 1 Quality
- 1 Function
- 1 Impact

One of the most impactful elements of a historic public realm is telling the stories of that place. Signage, wayfinding, and storytelling can work together to reveal histories, tell stories, and help people confidently get from one place to another, discovering new and exciting histories along the way.

Current City-placed signage and wayfinding within the district is generally limited to typical parking regulations and street signs, with an occasional banner identifying downtown in general in a few locations.

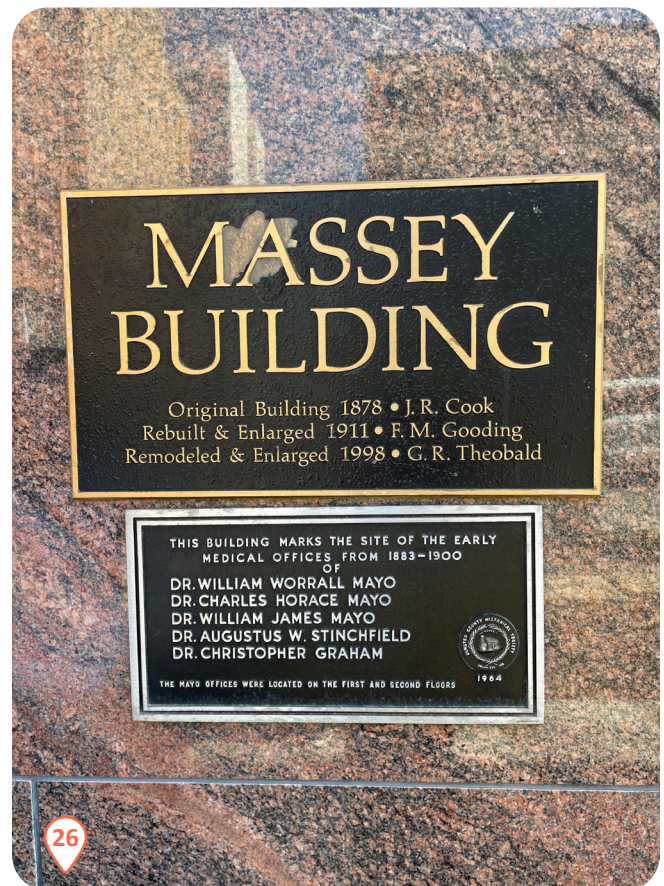


Small artistic spots of wayfinding help people access important connections, but where is the destination?

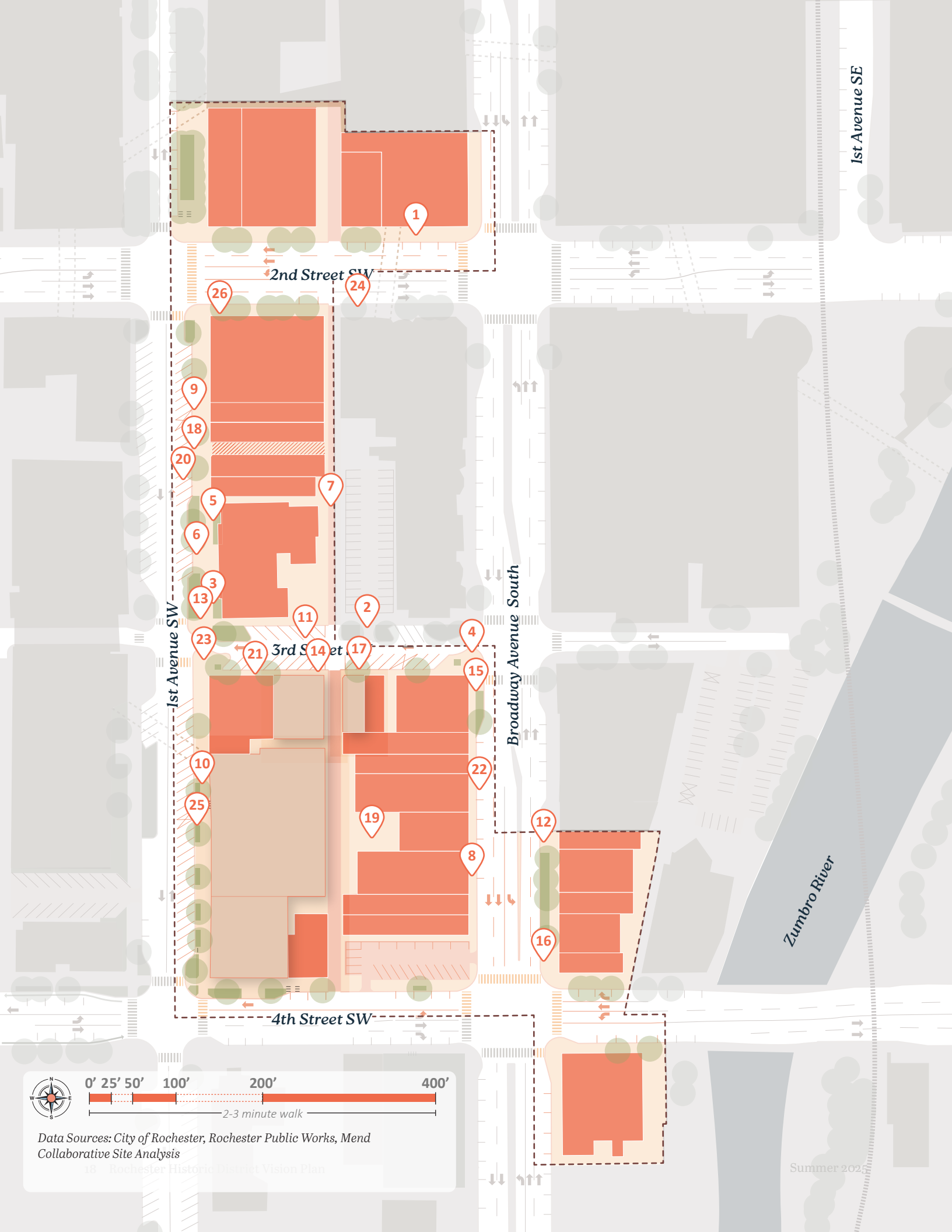


City-mounted banners have the opportunity be customized to the historic district to contribute to a sense of place

Property owners have found clever and unique ways to infuse storytelling into signage within their properties, whether that be about the history of businesses over time, important people, or modern cultural anecdotes. There is incredible opportunity to leverage the combination of signage, wayfinding, and storytelling in this district to emphasize a sense of place and reveal Rochester's stories.



Building owners often take up the effort to tell the story of the historic spaces within the district



1st Avenue SE

2nd Street SW

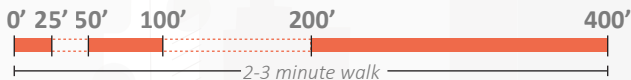
1st Avenue SW

3rd Street SW

Broadway Avenue South

Zumbro River

4th Street SW



Data Sources: City of Rochester, Rochester Public Works, Mend Collaborative Site Analysis

The Evolution of the Public Realm Over Time

Studying Broadway Ave, looking northwest from 4th St:



1890

- Original building facades
- Slower traffic, one lane each way
- Shade, decor, and facade differentiation
- Angled parking as buffer from traffic

... 57 Years ...



1947

- Traffic control signalling
- Signage as decor and placemaking
- Lighting for safety
- Angled parking as buffer from traffic
- Quickening traffic, one lane each way
- Cyclists and "jaywalkers" comfortably using street

... 18 Years ...



1965

- Added layers of lighting for safety
- Building face simplification
- Parallel parking provides less buffer from traffic
- Quickening traffic, two lanes each way

... 60 Years ...



2025

- Signage diminished but still there
- Parallel parking provides less buffer from traffic
- Very quick traffic, two lanes each way
- Median maintains car-focused roadway

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The Energy

*What is the exciting energy of Rochester's
Downtown Commercial Historic District?*



Live, Work, Play

People live, work and play in this historic district

The Rochester Downtown Commercial Historic District has an incredible and diverse array of building uses. These businesses are inherently preserving the buildings through adaptive reuse and drawing people into the district to dine, shop, do business, and live. The uses of these buildings contribute to a vibrant culture within the district that speaks to its heritage while introducing global and multi-cultural experiences for those living, working, and visiting the district.

Residences

From the residences at Old City Hall, to newer apartment complexes, to people living on upper levels of some buildings, there is a variety of residences between historic and non-historic structures within the district. Student focused housing anchors the newer developments, and traditional apartments are scattered throughout the district. Short-term rentals also house folks spending just a few nights downtown.

Shopping

The Downtown Commercial Historic District stays true to its historic purpose for drawing people here with many shops occupying the traditional storefronts. Art galleries, record stores, tobacco shops, vintage and antique stores, and more provide residents and visitors with a variety of unique shopping experiences.



Working

Many types of businesses call the district home, where they have offices, headquarters, or showrooms. Architecture and engineering firms, dental offices, photography studios, Destination Medical Center's headquarters, and more all contribute to the day-to-day life of the district.

Food and Beverage

The district is a great place to find a variety of dining and beverage options. Small grocers offer quick take-out options, nice shops offer delicacies like gourmet popcorn and boba teas, sit-down restaurants span global palettes, and watering holes offer libations for those in need of winding down.

All images in this section are from a district analysis process courtesy of Mend Collaborative.

Art & Design

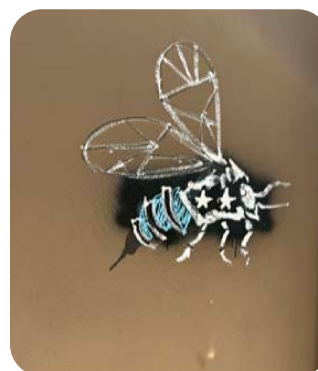
The Downtown Commercial Historic District is brought to life through public art and design

Aside from the stunning architecture of historic buildings, the district is vibrant with colorful artwork, murals, and small discoveries. Art in the public realm is important for several reasons, including:

- **Cultural identity and expression**
- **Inclusion and belonging**
- **Social and civic engagement**
- **Aesthetic and environmental enhancement**
- **Economic and touristic value**
- **Educational opportunities**
- **Encouragement of creativity and innovation**

In essence, public artwork isn't just decoration—it plays a vital role in shaping meaningful, dynamic, and inclusive public spaces, especially in a historic district where there is a rich story to reveal and share.

The district has become a hub of public art, as well as companies that support art and design. Local photography studios, art studios, music shops, and design consultants are sprinkled throughout the district. Not only is there passive art displayed on the walls and ground, but active artistic expression is being created here.

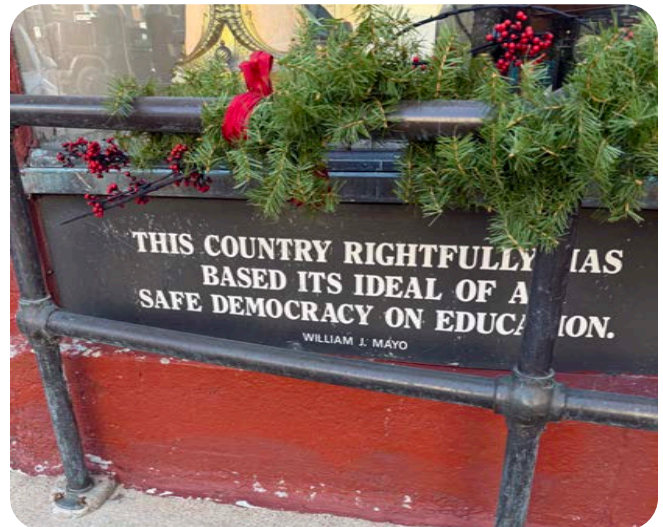
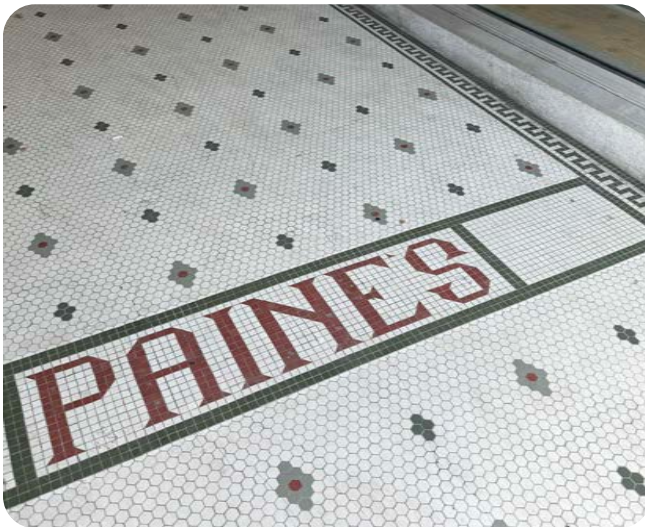
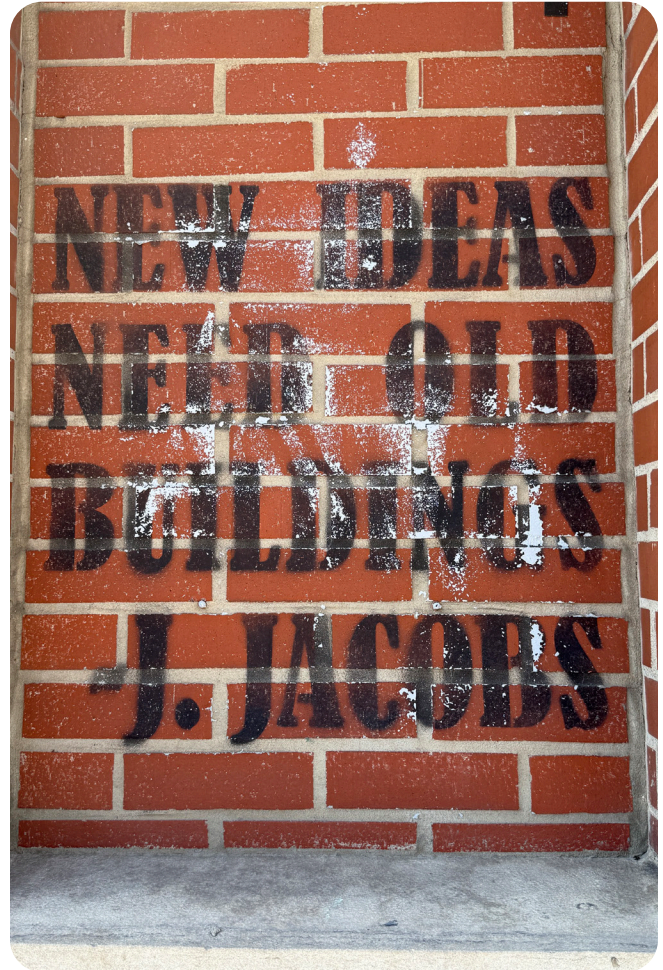


Historical Interpretation

The Downtown Commercial Historic District's story is being told through individuals and their properties

It is clear that some property owners and business owners have a strong passion for the history of the district. Various types of signage, plaques, and graffiti art, whether new or preserved, express the understanding of this place's history through the lens of those who have a stake in this part of downtown. This expression of historical interpretation has become a charming characteristic of the district, and although isn't consistent from building to building, is a fun way to stumble across big and small stories.

Through this public realm vision plan process, there is opportunity to coordinate with these passionate stakeholders who bear these stories and relics to discover new and more expansive ways to embrace the history of the district in public spaces.



The Context

What place does the Rochester Downtown Commercial Historic District hold in the greater downtown fabric?



Connections to Previous Plans

Connecting the District to the Future of Downtown Rochester

The historic district sits at the intersection of several transformative initiatives shaping the future of downtown Rochester. **The Destination Medical Center (DMC) 5-Year Development Plan Update (2020)**, the **Downtown Waterfront Southeast (DWSE) Small Area Plan (2021)**, the **Riverfront Small Area Plan (2022)**, the upcoming **Link Bus Rapid Transit Project**, and the **Rochester Downtown Master Plan (2010)** together represent a substantial investment in mobility, development, and public realm infrastructure in the surrounding area.

As these plans move into implementation, they are expected to bring thousands of new residents, workers, and visitors into the area. This plan recognizes the importance of not treating the historic district as a standalone entity, but as a vital connector within a broader downtown framework. It is essential that development, access, and placemaking strategies within the district align with adjacent plans to create a cohesive and active urban environment. This includes strengthening physical connections, reinforcing shared public realm qualities, and ensuring complementary uses and experiences that encourage seamless movement between areas. This plan builds on the priorities of these previous planning efforts by ensuring that the historic district does not stand apart, but instead functions as an integral part of a growing and evolving downtown core.



Destination Medical Center 5-Year Development Plan Update (2020)

The DMC Development Plan is a 20-year vision guiding the transformation of downtown Rochester through public-private investment, with the goal of positioning the city as a global destination for health and wellness. The plan includes mobility improvements, public realm investment, and catalytic private development. DMC is currently undergoing the 2025 update to this plan, to be completed fall of 2025. The DMC district overlaps the historic district boundary, creating a direct relationship between the two plans.

Key priorities include:

- **Mobility:** Investment in a high-frequency electric Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line, expanded pedestrian and bike infrastructure, and a pilot program for autonomous shuttles.
- **Public Realm:** Construction of signature spaces such as Heart of the City and Discovery Walk, and initial design work for new downtown waterfront spaces.

- **Development:** Continued focus on the Discovery Square innovation district, expansion of housing options, and support for local retail and entrepreneurship.

Relevance to This Plan:

This plan recognizes the historic district's strategic location within the DMC geography and builds on its potential to support DMC goals. By enhancing walkability, improving public space design, and supporting small businesses, the district can serve as a key node that supports the broader vision of a vibrant, connected, and people-centered downtown.



Downtown Waterfront Southeast (DWSE) Small Area Plan (2021)

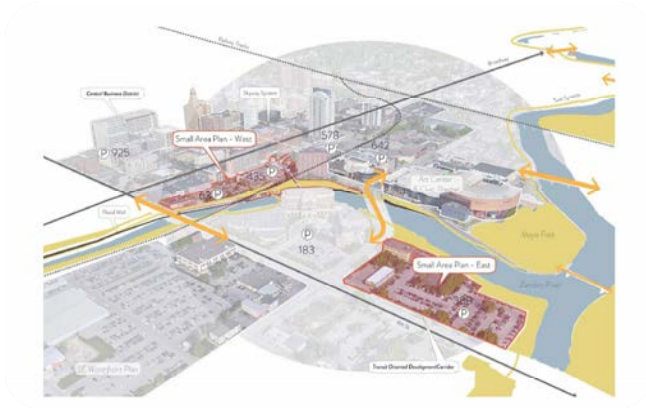
The DWSE Small Area Plan provides a framework for revitalizing 60 acres of underutilized land immediately southeast of the historic district. Anchored by the former AMPI site, the plan envisions the creation of a new urban neighborhood with a mix of housing, local retail, open space, and civic destinations. The project area is located between downtown, Slatterly Park, and Sunnyside neighborhoods, and is directly connected to Soldiers Field and the Zumbro River.

Key features of the plan include:

- **Equity-Focused Development:** New housing at a variety of price points, commercial space for start-ups, and accessible public spaces designed for all abilities.
- **Public Realm Improvements:** A new riverfront promenade, plaza, and green corridors that extend into adjacent neighborhoods.
- **Multimodal Connectivity:** A connected street grid, new pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and integration with future BRT service.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Enhanced stormwater systems, increased tree canopy, and reduced impervious surfaces.

Relevance to This Plan:

This plan acknowledges that 4th Street SE and adjacent corridors will become important east-west connectors as development in DWSE progresses. The historic district must be designed to receive and direct this new activity, especially by strengthening pedestrian and transit connections, enhancing wayfinding, and aligning with public realm improvements that flow from the east. The result should be a seamless transition between character areas, ensuring that the district supports and benefits from new investment in adjacent neighborhoods.



Riverfront Small Area Plan (2022)

The Riverfront Small Area Plan addresses the future of two city-owned sites totaling 5.5 acres along the Zumbro River between 2nd and 4th Streets. The western site includes the former Red Owl Grocery and Time Theater buildings, a surface parking lot, and a deteriorating city-owned parking ramp. The eastern site is primarily used for surface parking and is located adjacent to major civic destinations including the Mayo Civic Center, the library, and Mayo Park.

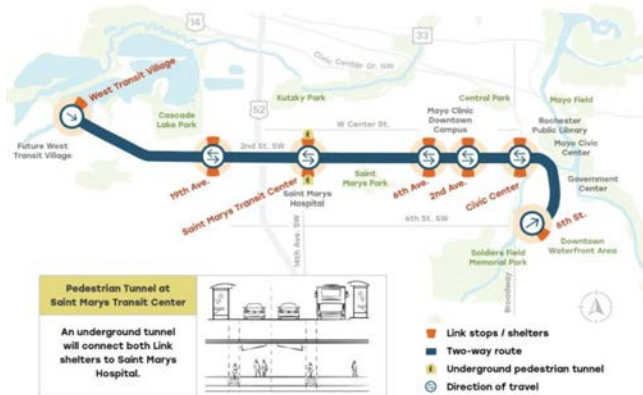
The plan proposes:

- 500,000–700,000 square feet of new mixed-use development, including housing and ground-floor commercial uses aimed at local businesses.
- Substantial public realm investments, such as terraced riverfront open space, new parks, and trail enhancements.
- Adaptive reuse of historic buildings and reinterpretation of Rochester’s milling and industrial past.
- Enhanced connections to downtown via 3rd Street and 4th Avenue SE, as well as integration with future BRT service.

The Riverfront SAP emphasizes equity, sustainability, and placemaking, positioning the river as a civic destination and community asset. It also aligns closely with the city’s comprehensive plan and builds upon investments in Discovery Walk and Heart of the City.

Relevance to This Plan:

This plan views the historic district as an essential link between civic anchors and the emerging riverfront. 3rd and 4th Streets, in particular, are key corridors for creating continuity between these areas. Enhancements to sidewalks, lighting, signage, and activation strategies in the district can strengthen its role as a connector and gateway. Additionally, programming and business development strategies in the district can complement new activity along the riverfront, reinforcing both areas as vibrant downtown destinations.



Link Bus Rapid Transit project (current)

The Link Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project is a transformative 2.8-mile corridor along 2nd Street that will provide high-frequency, fare-free transit service between key destinations in Rochester, including downtown, the Mayo Civic Center, Mayo Clinic campuses, and the Downtown Waterfront Southeast area. As one of the city's busiest corridors—with over 21,800 vehicles and 13,000 transit riders daily—2nd Street is a critical spine for future mobility and growth. Link is a collaborative effort between the City of Rochester, Destination Medical Center (DMC), Mayo Clinic, Olmsted County and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

Key features of the plan include:

- **Frequent, All-Day Service:** Electric buses will run every 5 minutes during peak hours and every 10–15 minutes off-peak, from 5 a.m. to midnight on weekdays and 8 a.m. to midnight on weekends.
- **High-Quality Stations:** 12 modern, accessible stations at 7 locations will offer real-time information and enhanced amenities to improve the rider experience.
- **Sustainable Operations:** The system will be fully electric and fare-free, supporting city goals for equity, climate resilience, and clean mobility.

- **Integrated Partnerships:** Led by the City with support from Mayo Clinic and DMC, Link demonstrates the power of coordinated investment in public infrastructure.
- **Construction Timeline:** Groundbreaking occurred in June 2025, with service scheduled to begin in 2027.

Relevance to This Plan:

Link BRT will directly shape mobility and development patterns within the Historic District. By anchoring one of its stations near the district and dramatically improving access to 2nd Street, Link offers an opportunity to strengthen east-west connections and reduce car dependence. The investment aligns with public realm improvements envisioned in other plan and helps ensure that the Historic District remains well-integrated with a rapidly evolving downtown core.

Downtown Rochester

Master Plan Report • August 2010



Downtown Rochester Master Plan (2010)

The Rochester Downtown Master Plan presented a comprehensive vision for downtown as a vibrant, walkable, and economically resilient core. Developed through a collaboration among the City of Rochester, Mayo Clinic, University of Minnesota Rochester (UMR), the Rochester Downtown Alliance, and the Rochester Area Foundation, the plan lays out a flexible framework to guide growth, mobility, and design over a 20-year horizon. It builds on key assets—Mayo Clinic, UMR, historic buildings, civic and cultural institutions, and the Zumbro River—while promoting a more connected and livable downtown.

Key features of the plan include:

- **District-Based Framework:** Defines four mixed-use districts—Main Street, Arts and Riverfront, Education and Research, and Medical/Clinical—each designed to promote synergy, walkability, and diverse activity.
- **Public Realm and Open Space Investments:** Establishes an interconnected open space network including enhanced riverfront areas, civic plazas, linear parks, and complete streets.
- **Multimodal Mobility Strategy:** Integrates land use with active transportation, prioritizing walking, biking, transit, and reduced dependence on cars.
- **Sustainability Principles:** Promotes energy-efficient buildings, climate-sensitive urban design, and resilient infrastructure systems.
- **Catalytic Development Opportunities:** Identifies opportunity sites in each district to spur private investment and model high-quality, urban development.

Relevance to This Plan:

The Downtown Master Plan remains a foundational policy document for the Historic District. Its emphasis on walkable urban form, integration with regional anchors like Mayo and UMR, and a high-quality public realm all directly support strategies to preserve and activate the Historic District. The plan's call to strengthen pedestrian corridors such as 1st Avenue, enhance riverfront connections, and invest in streetscapes and public space are especially relevant. Implementation of these elements will help position the Historic District as a central and welcoming part of a growing, mixed-use downtown.

Regulatory Analysis

The regulatory framework shaping the Rochester Downtown Commercial Historic District is defined by a combination of zoning and preservation overlays. Understanding these layers is essential to identifying both the opportunities and constraints for future development, business activity, and public realm improvements. This section summarizes the applicable regulations and their implications for design and implementation within the district.

Zoning Summary

The historic district is located within the MX-D (Mixed Use Downtown) Business Subdistrict, which is intended to support a vibrant, high-intensity mix of retail, office, residential, and entertainment uses in alignment with the Downtown Master Plan. This zoning allows for flexible, pedestrian-oriented development with no minimum lot size or setbacks, and building heights of up to 235 feet. The district encourages active ground-floor uses, multimodal access, and high-quality urban design to reinforce downtown as the city's commercial and cultural core.

The area is also subject to a Heritage Preservation Overlay (HPO), which provides additional protections for properties recognized as historically or architecturally significant. Within the HPO, exterior alterations, demolitions, and new construction are subject to design review and require a Certificate of Appropriateness to ensure compatibility with the district's historic character.

Together, these layers of regulation support both dynamic urban development and the preservation of Rochester's architectural heritage, requiring thoughtful design that honors the past while embracing the future.

Why This is Important

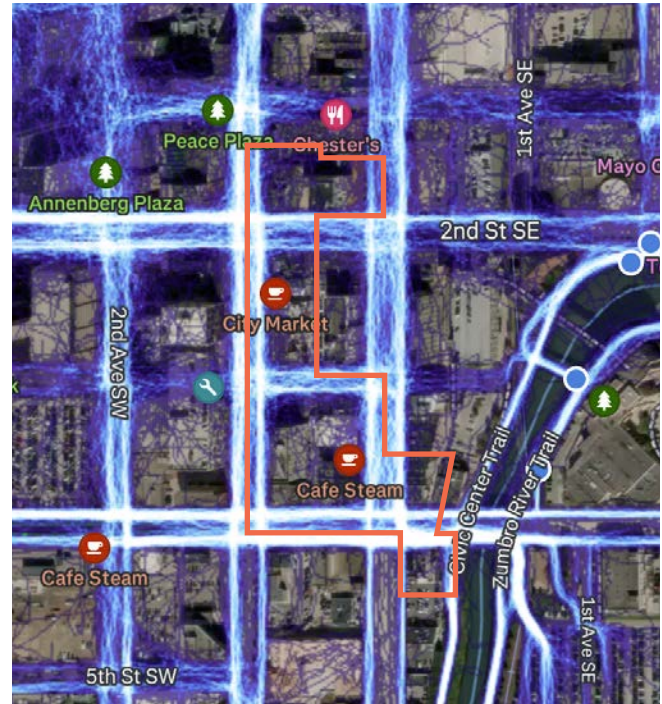
The regulatory context of the district offers considerable flexibility for high-intensity, mixed-use development while establishing safeguards to protect its historic identity. Future improvements must navigate this balance—leveraging the potential of the MX-D Business zoning to support economic vitality, while respecting the design standards and preservation goals embedded in the Heritage Preservation Overlay. This dual framework ensures that growth within the district can be both ambitious and context-sensitive.

Mobility Analysis

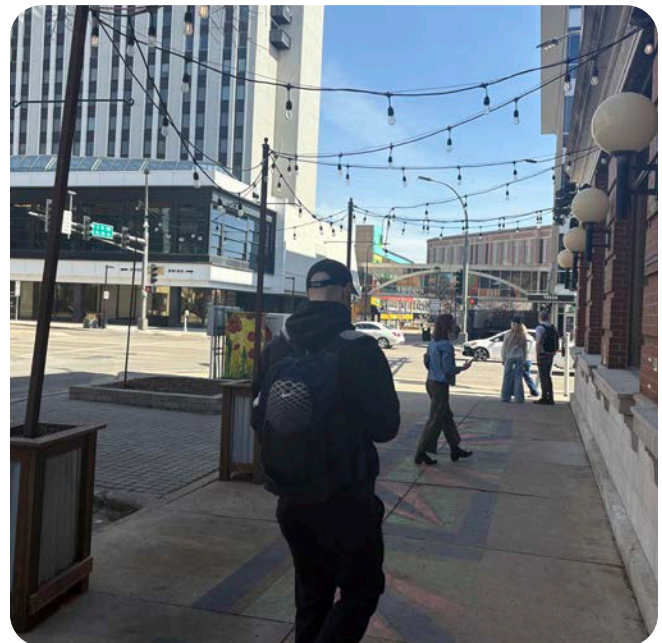
How are people moving?

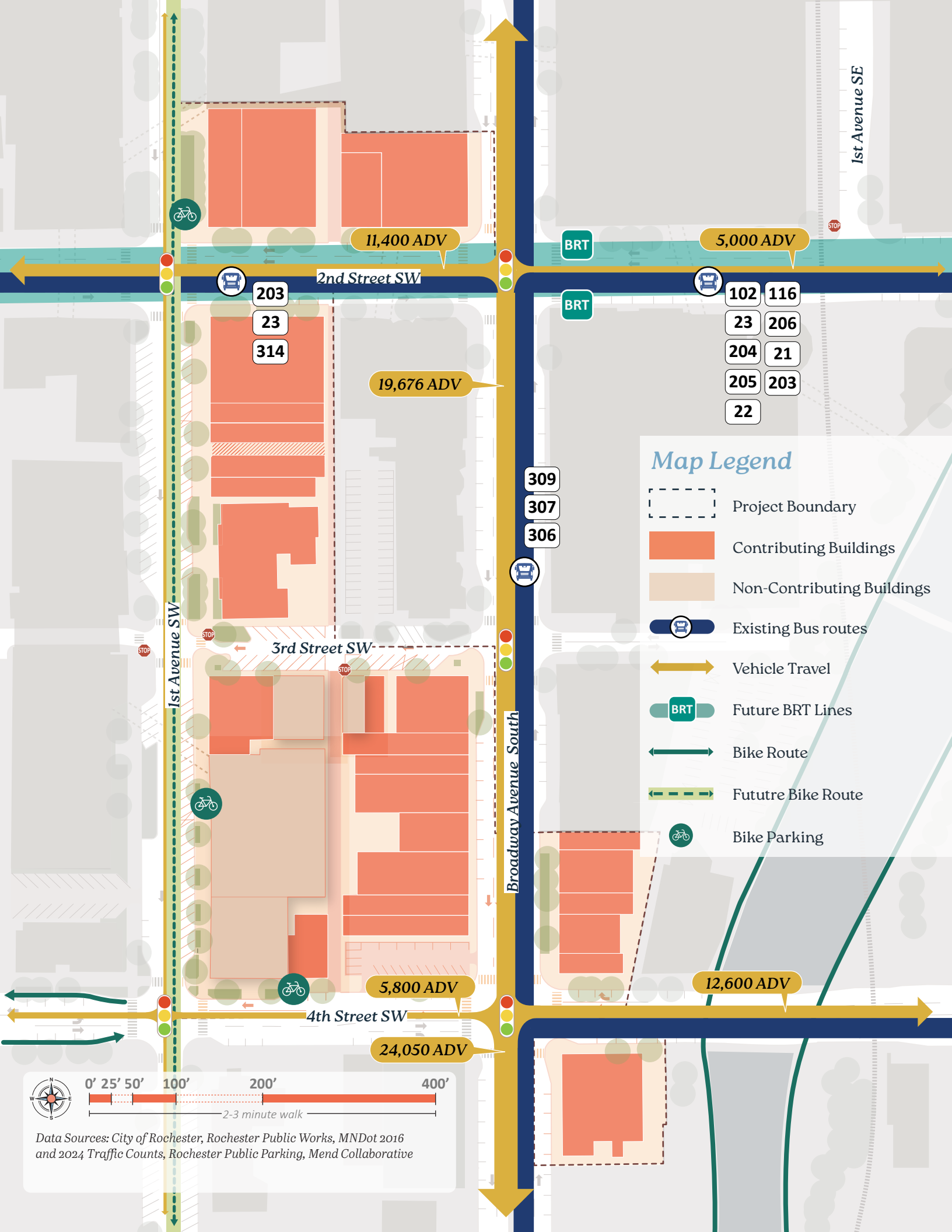
As Rochester's largest collection of late nineteenth-century commercial buildings, the historic district was originally designed with pedestrians in mind. Today, using twenty-first-century tools like Strava, we can clearly see that it remains a major pedestrian destination within Downtown.

At the same time, the district has been accommodating vehicle traffic for over a century. The streets that run through and alongside it now serve a dual role—providing essential access to the district itself and functioning as key connectors to the broader city for those passing through.



A "heat map" from Strava shows pedestrian movement. The district stands out as being especially trafficked by walking and running compared to adjacent areas of downtown.





Map Legend

- Project Boundary
- Contributing Buildings
- Non-Contributing Buildings
- Existing Bus routes
- Vehicle Travel
- Future BRT Lines
- Bike Route
- Future Bike Route
- Bike Parking



Data Sources: City of Rochester, Rochester Public Works, MNDot 2016 and 2024 Traffic Counts, Rochester Public Parking, Mend Collaborative

Corridor Priorities

Broadway Avenue South

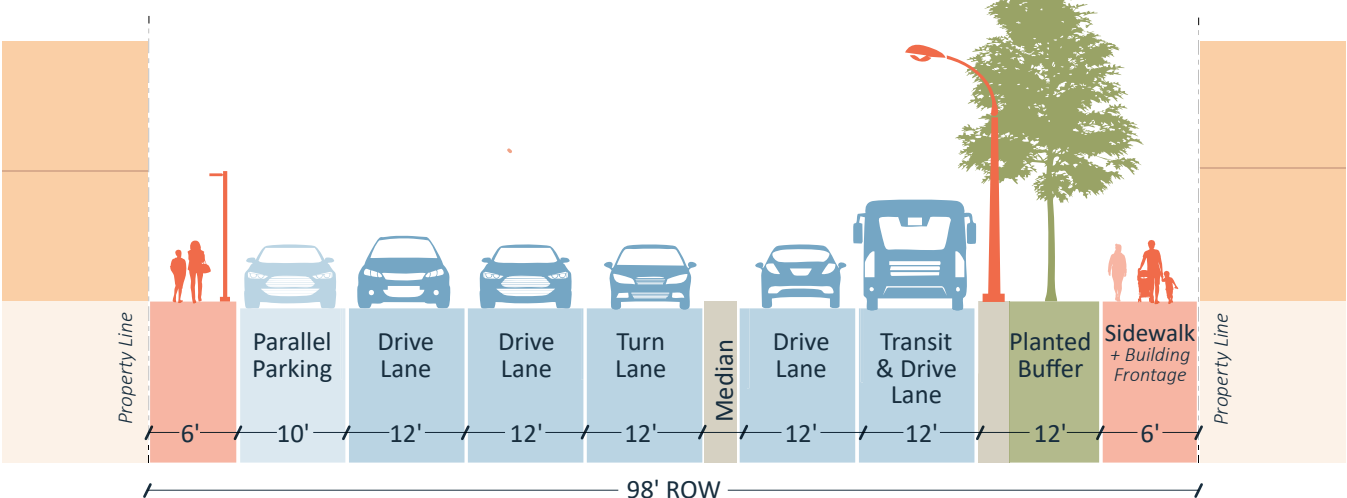
Broadway is one of Rochester’s most important north-south corridors, carrying more than 19,000 vehicles per day—by far the highest volume of any street in the district. While much of this traffic is passing through to destinations north and south, data from intersecting east-west streets suggests that many drivers use this stretch of Broadway for short trips before turning east onto 2nd Street SW or west onto 4th Street SE. Broadway also functions as a key transit spine, with several bus routes running along it daily. Despite this multimodal activity, the majority of the public right-of-way is dedicated to vehicle movement or parking, leaving only narrow sidewalks for pedestrians.

2nd Street South

2nd Street South forms the northern edge of the district, running east-west and linking key destinations across downtown. To the west, it connects the district with the Mayo Clinic’s main campus; to the east, it provides access to the Rochester Public Library, Rochester Art Center, Mayo Civic Center, St. Marys, Highway 52, and Mayo Park.

Traffic volumes on 2nd Street South vary significantly: west of Broadway, the corridor sees just over 11,000 vehicles per day, while east of Broadway, that number drops to about 5,000. In addition to its role in vehicle circulation, 2nd Street South is a vital transit corridor—one that will become even more important with the introduction of Link, Rochester’s new 2.8-mile Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line. Expected to serve around 11,000 passengers daily, Link will likely bring transit ridership along 2nd Street South to levels equal to or surpassing personal vehicle use. The Civic Center Station, located along 2nd, will directly serve the district.

Broadway Avenue South

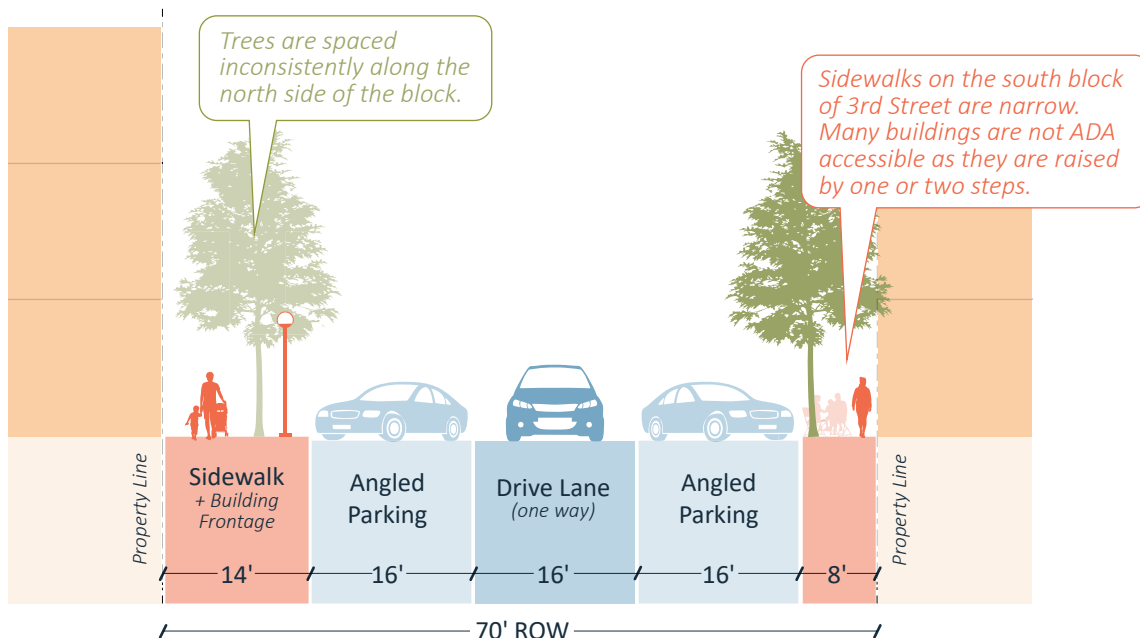


3rd Street South

3rd Street South runs east-west through the heart of the district and functions primarily as a local access street, with minimal through traffic. Most drivers using 3rd Street South are headed to destinations within the district itself. The street features wide sidewalks and generous on-street parking, making it both pedestrian-friendly and convenient for visitors.

Because it plays a limited role in the broader mobility network, 3rd Street South is well-suited for temporary full or partial closures to support events and activations. One of its key functions is providing access to major city-owned parking structures located on both the east and west ends of the district. Additionally, on its eastern end, 3rd Street South offers an attractive pedestrian and bicycle connection to the Zumbro River, its trail network, and the historic site of Rochester's first mill.

3rd Street South Section



4th Street South

4th Street South runs east-west along the southern edge of the district. To the east, it serves as a critical river crossing, currently carrying over 12,000 vehicles per day. In contrast, west of Broadway, traffic drops to just under 6,000 vehicles daily. However, the construction of a new bridge over the Zumbro River at 6th Street—two blocks south—will likely reduce traffic volumes on 4th in the future.

Key destinations along 4th include the Government Center complex to the east and the rapidly growing Discovery Square Innovation District to the west. As traffic patterns shift with the new bridge, 4th Street South may present new opportunities to reimagine the use of public right-of-way. Currently, the street does not serve any bus routes and lacks bicycle facilities within the historic district itself, though west of the district, 4th has good bike facilities, leading up to and past Discovery Square and Discovery Walk.

1st Avenue SW

Like 3rd Street, 1st Avenue is a low-traffic corridor that primarily serves local access needs, including key access to the City-owned 3rd Street Parking Ramp. The street features wide sidewalks and a substantial amount of angled parking that supports nearby businesses. While it currently lacks dedicated bicycle facilities, there is potential here for a future bicycle route, positioning it for improved multimodal use over time.

Alleys

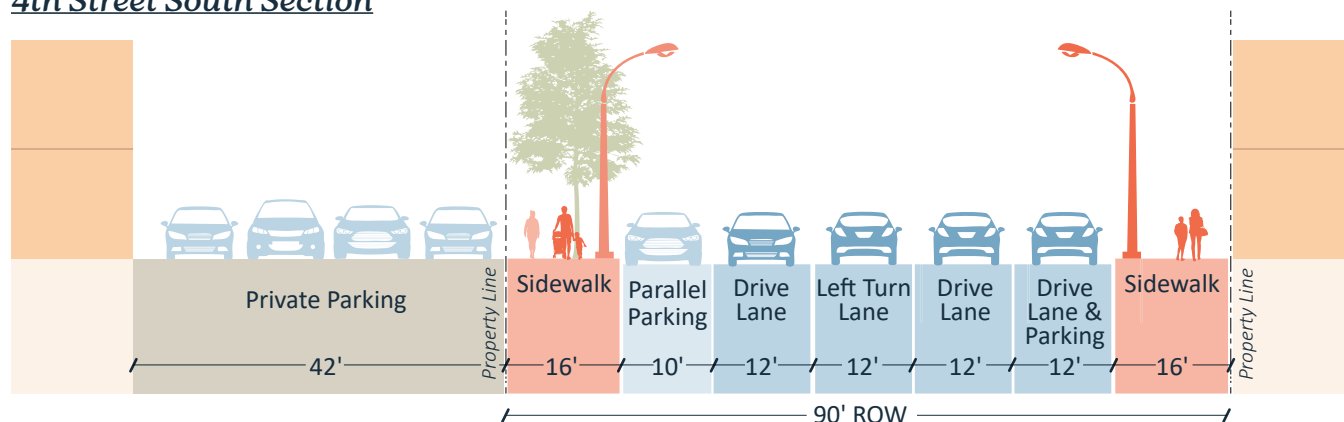
In addition to the primary transportation corridors, one of the district's distinguishing features is its network of alleys. While these alleys currently serve functional roles—primarily for waste collection and access to parking—they also present unique opportunities to enhance pedestrian connectivity and expand the public realm. With thoughtful design and solutions for maintaining necessary building access, these spaces could be an integral part and defining feature of the future of the public realm in the district.

Why Studying This is Important

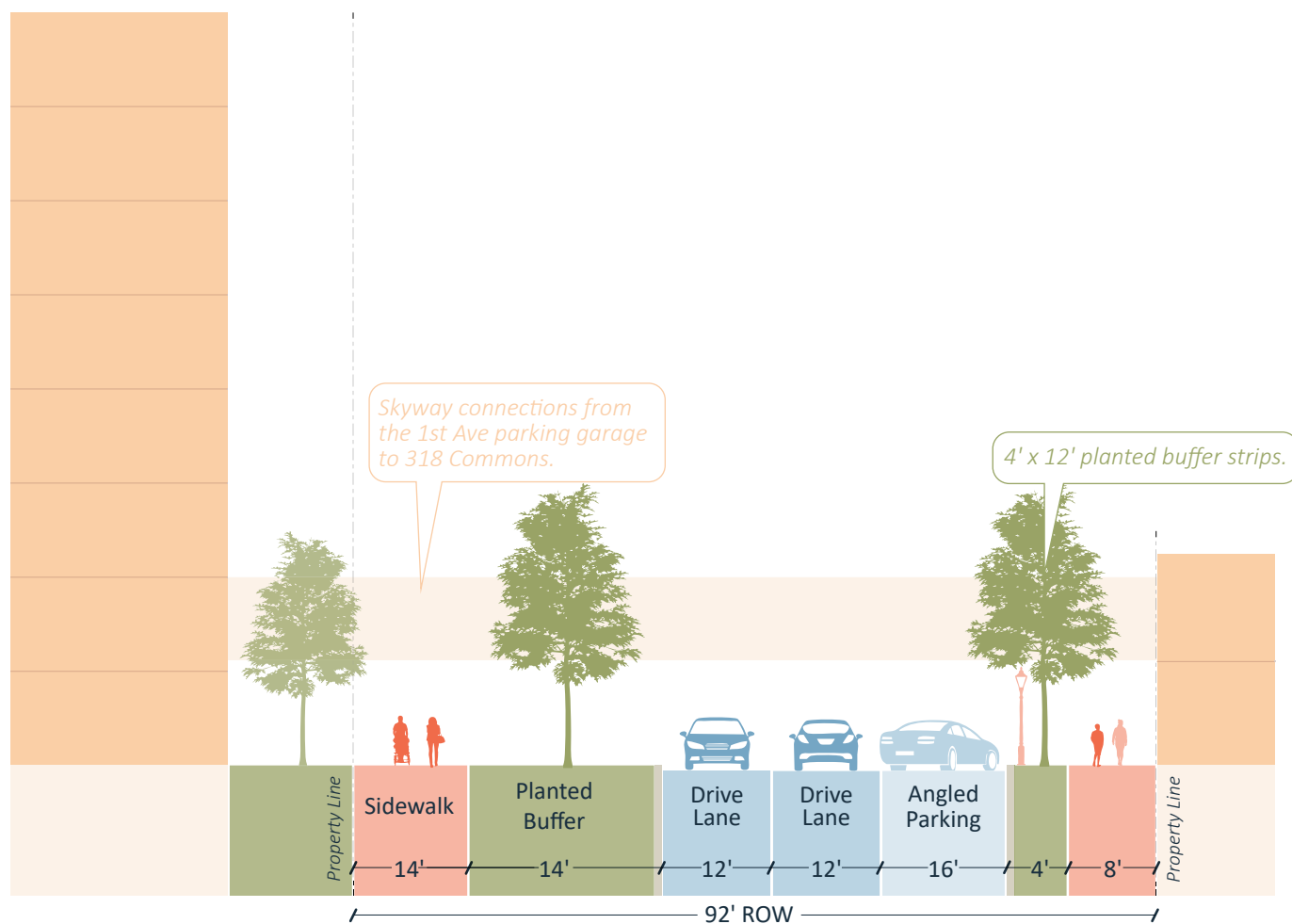
Mobility within the historic district reflects a dynamic blend of past and present. Originally designed for pedestrians, the district remains a major walking destination. At the same time, the district has evolved to support multiple modes of transportation, balancing local access with regional connectivity.

Major corridors like Broadway and 2nd Street carry the highest traffic volumes and support significant transit use, including the future Link BRT line. Other streets, like 3rd Street and 1st Avenue, serve primarily local needs, offering space for pedestrians, parking, and flexible uses such as events. 4th Street functions as a key east-west connector, though its role may shift as new infrastructure comes online. Meanwhile, the district's alley network—though currently utilitarian—offers untapped potential to support walking and placemaking. Together, these layered systems shape a district that is both well-connected and primed for a more pedestrian- and transit-oriented future.

4th Street South Section

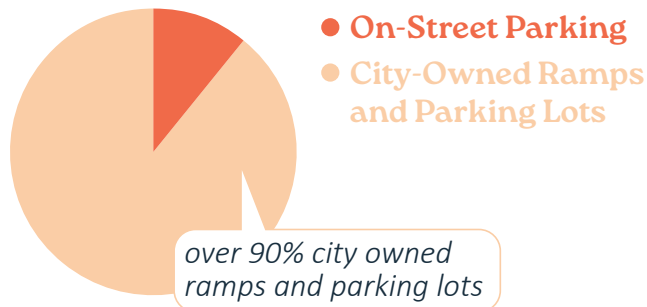


1st Avenue South Section



Parking

As a district centered around retail, dining, and other customer-focused activities, parking plays a crucial role—second only to foot traffic—in supporting the local business economy. The area is served by a combination of large city-owned parking garages and on-street parking. Striking the right balance between these options, and effectively managing parking availability, will be essential to any public realm strategy. A well-managed system can support access without overwhelming the pedestrian experience vital to the district's success.

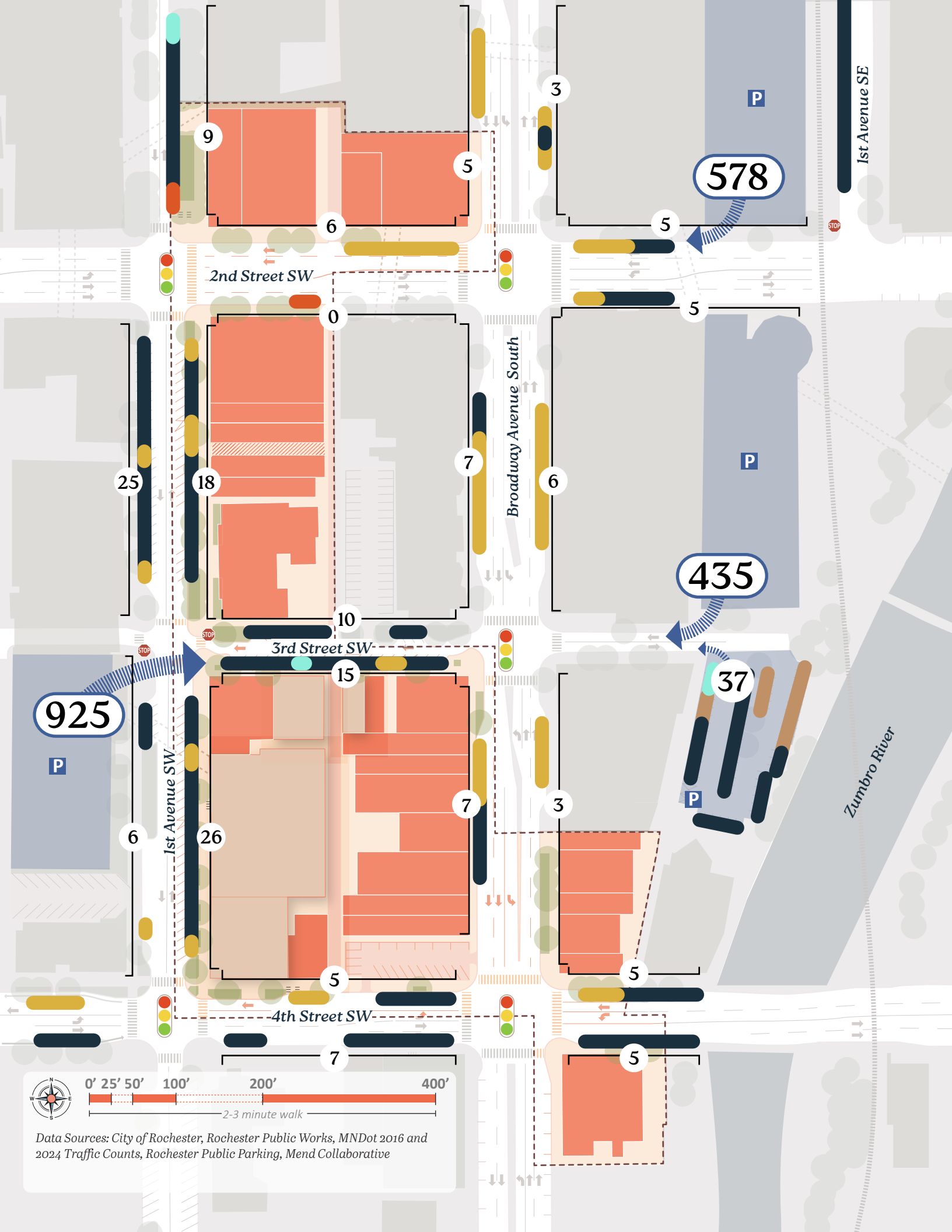


On-Street Parking

On-street parking is the most visible and directly accessible form of parking in the district. While a small number of spaces are reserved for handicap parking and several are designated loading zones, most are metered. These spots have a three-hour maximum limit and are priced at \$2 per hour. In total, there are 178 on-street parking spaces within the district and on surrounding blocks.

City Owned Ramps and Parking Lots

The district is also served by several city-owned and operated parking ramps and surface lots nearby. These facilities offer 1,975 spaces and are accessible 24/7. Weekday pricing generally matches the on-street meter rate, with the exception of the ramps offering free parking for visits less than an hour, and anytime after 5pm. Weekends in the ramps are free. Ramps also offer monthly rates, making them convenient for employees who work in or near the district.

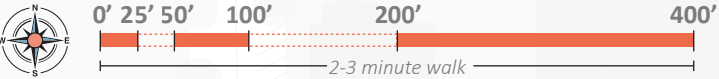


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Data Sources: City of Rochester, Rochester Public Works, MNDot 2016 and 2024 Traffic Counts, Rochester Public Parking, Mend Collaborative

Parking Prices			
Parking Type	Address	Weekly Rates	Weekend Rates
City-Owned Ramps	14 2nd St SE Rochester, MN 55904	0-1 hour \$0	free 6:30am-2:30am
		1-1.5 hours \$2.00	
	100 3rd St SW Rochester MN, 55902	2-2.5 hours \$4.00	
		3-3.5 hours \$6.00	
	13 2nd St SE Rochester, MN 55904	4-4.5 hours \$8.00	
		5-5.5 hours \$12.00	
		6-12 hours \$16.00 free 5pm-2:30am	
City-Owned Parking Lot	99 3rd St SE Rochester MN 55904	\$2.50/hour, two hour max	\$2.50/hour, two hour max
City-Owned On-Street Meters	n/a	\$2.00 per hour for a maximum of 3 hours 8am-5pm, free after 5pm	free

Map Legend (pg 38)

	Project Boundary
	Contributing Buildings
	Non-Contributing Buildings
	Metered Parking
	Loading Zone
	Handicap Parking
	Public Safety Vehicle Parking
	Permit Parking
	Parking Ramp
	Parking Ramp Exit/Entry
	Key Pedestrian Routes from Parking Ramps

Why Studying This is Important

Effectively managing the balance between on-street and off-street parking is one of the district's biggest opportunities. With over 90% of parking located in ramps, the City should aim to maximize their use—reserving on-street spaces for short-term, high-turnover needs. Achieving this balance will require thoughtful coordination of pricing, signage, and wayfinding.

End of Case for Action.