



City of  
**MASON**  
CITY  
ESTABLISHED 1847  
IOWA  
**2020**

# WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN



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# 2020 WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN

## MASON CITY, IOWA

### Planning & Zoning Commission:

*Colleen Niedermayer, Chair*  
*Matt O'Brien, Vice Chair*  
*Gary Anderson*  
*Gary Christiansen*  
*Melissa Fabian*  
*Lori Jorgenson*  
*Daniel Worden*

### City Council:

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*Paul Adams, At Large*  
*Tom Thoma, At Large*  
*John Lee, First Ward*  
*Will Symonds, Second Ward*  
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## PLAN SUMMARY

Willow Creek flows south of Downtown Mason City before emptying into the Winnebago River. Except for an underutilized trail along part of the creek, the creek is inaccessible. For the most part, the city has turned its back on this green corridor in the heart of the city.

In 2004, the City adopted the *Willow Creek Master Plan 2004*. This ambitious plan recommended new housing, mixed-use commercial, a hotel, and a multi-use arena/ community center, all near Willow Creek. The 2008 Flood drastically affected development along the creek and made most of the 2004 Plan recommendations obsolete.

The development of the River City Renaissance Reinvestment District once again turned attention to Willow Creek. The City renewed its participation in the Iowa Great Places program in 2019, with an emphasis on improvements to the Willow Creek corridor. Later in 2019, the Planning and Zoning Commission began an update to the 2004 Plan, to refocus attention on the creek and recommend a strategy to make Willow Creek another element in the River City Renaissance. The *Willow Creek Plan 2020* is the culmination of this effort.

The 2020 Plan accounts for the expanded floodway fringe resulting from the 2008 Flood and recommends development that conforms to floodplain management regulations. The Plan also incorporates the River City Renaissance developments: the Multi-Use Arena and Performing Arts Pavilion within the Southbridge Mall, and a new Hotel, with a ballroom and a skywalk connecting it to the renovated Music Man Square Conference Center.

The Plan recommends providing public access to Willow Creek, with clearing of brush and improvements to the existing Willow Creek Trail. This will include extensions of the trail and improvements to the street crossings, creating new, safer opportunities for walkability, and connections to the city-wide bikeway system. Incorporating public art and pedestrian amenities along the trail extends Downtown amenities to the creek. New businesses near the

creek will be oriented to the trail and will attract both pedestrians and cyclists (see items marked on the Executive Summary Map as [1](#); the color indicates project priority).

Underutilized and vacant property, particularly near the creek, present premier opportunities for commercial, lodging and mixed use development. A few parcels not within the Floodway Fringe are in prime locations. Careful development and redevelopment within the Floodway Fringe, including new housing, will bring more customers to businesses in the area as well as to Downtown ([2](#)).

The Plan emphasizes aesthetic and historically-sensitive improvements to properties along the Iowa Highway 122 and US 65 corridors. As the major arterials through the city, improvements to these roads will make Mason City more attractive to visitors and provide a positive first impression ([3](#)). This also includes an emphasis on the bridges as gateways to the Downtown. New lighting and improved walkways on the bridges will make entry into the Downtown a unique and enjoyable experience ([4](#)).

The 2020 Plan encourages redevelopment of the older neighborhoods surrounding the creek corridor. While rehabilitation of some of the existing housing is possible, there are prime locations for new townhomes and apartments that can benefit from dramatic views of Willow Creek ([5](#)).

Finally, land near the creek presents an opportunity for expansion of open space. These properties permit expansions of the trail, improved access to the creek, and locations for active and passive recreation ([6](#)).

The Willow Creek Master Plan 2020 presents an ambitious and exciting strategy for highlighting this important natural asset - Willow Creek is truly an Iowa Great Place, in the heart of "The Original River City."

# WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN 2020 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY MAP

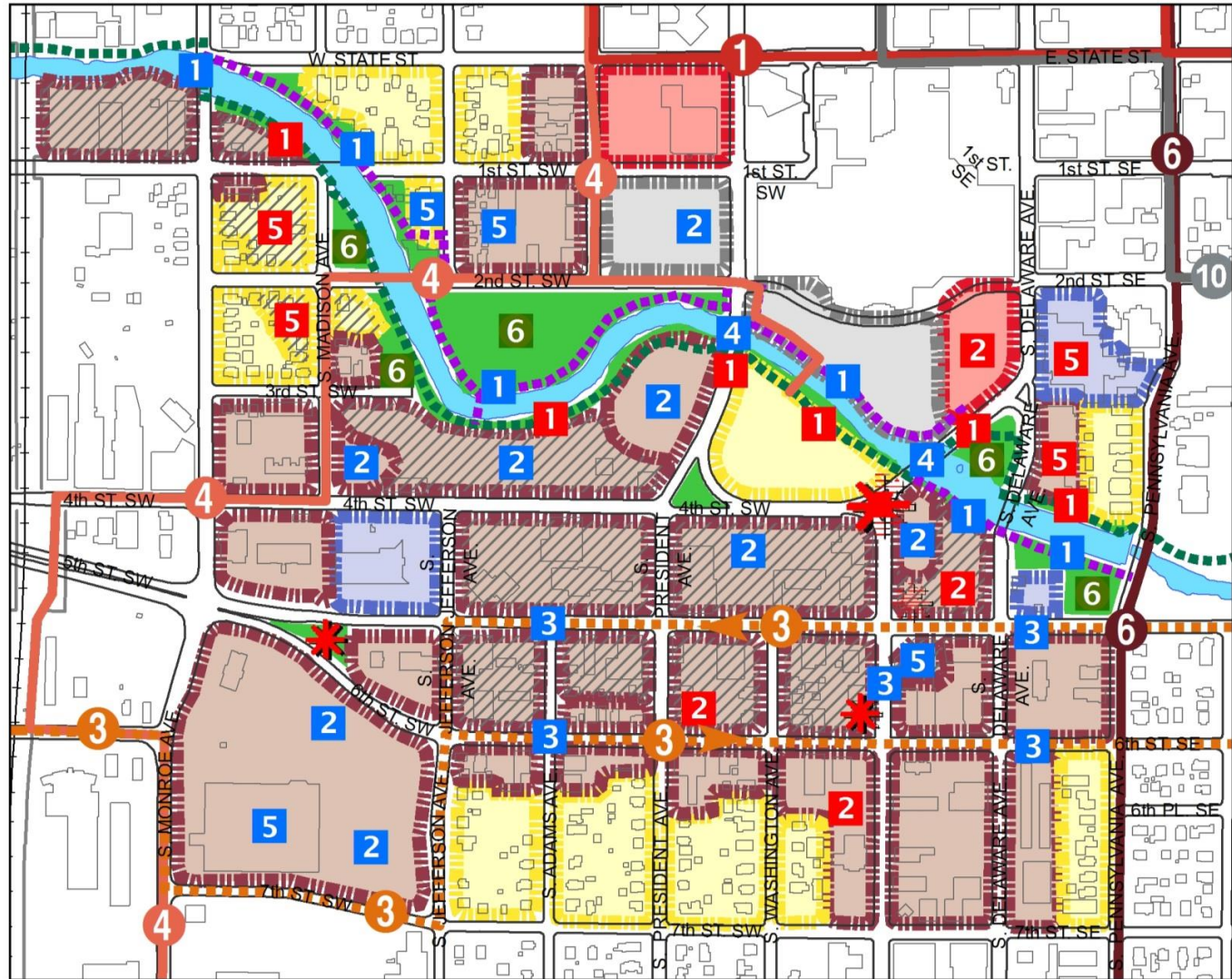
- On-Street Bike Routes
- Future Bike Routes
- Existing Trail
- Proposed Trail
- Developable Areas Subject to Floodplain Management
- Gateways

## Future Land Use (See Plan text for details)

- Park/Open Space
- Commercial
- Mixed Use
- Residential
- Parking
- Public

## Plan Recommendations (See Plan text for details)

- |                     |   |  |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Priority 1 Projects | Trail Extensions and Improvements       | Bridge and Trail Crossing Improvements           |
| Priority 2 Projects | New Commercial & Mixed Use Development  | Commercial, Housing, and Mixed Use Redevelopment |
| Priority 3 Projects | Highway Corridor Aesthetic Improvements | Open Space Development and Acquisition           |

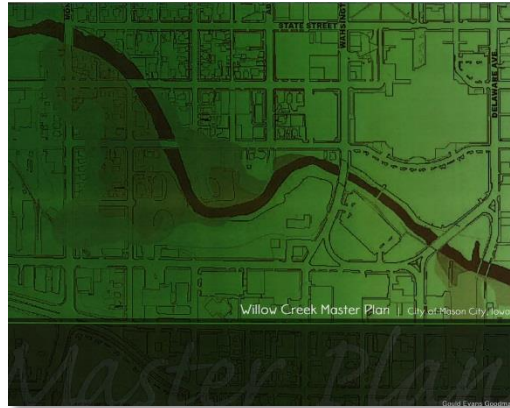


1 inch = 500 feet



## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Meredith Willson, the composer of “The Music Man” based the fictional “River City” on his hometown of Mason City. With the Winnebago River and Willow Creek flowing through the heart of Mason City, Willson’s “River City” moniker well describes the city of his youth.



Willow Creek is fed by Clear Creek, an outlet of Clear Lake, eight miles west of Downtown Mason City. The creek meanders through farmlands (both outside of and within the City limits) before crossing into the urbanized area at North Pierce Avenue. It winds through several neighborhoods and passes just south of downtown, eventually emptying into the Winnebago River in East Park, about ¾ miles east of downtown.

### The 2004 Plan

In 2004, the City of Mason City engaged Gould Evans Goodman Associates of Kansas City to create a plan for development along the Willow Creek corridor adjacent to Downtown Mason City. The 2004 Plan described the planning area as follows: “The Willow Creek Master Plan Area of Mason City, Iowa is located adjacent to downtown and is bounded by Monroe and Pennsylvania Avenues, Willow Creek and 7th Street south of the downtown core. In several instances adjacent properties outside the planning area are also addressed in the master plan because of the strong linkage or interface they have with Willow Creek.” This 2020 Update follows the same general boundaries (see **Map 1**).

The Plan stated “The goal of this master plan is to set a vision for the area as a gateway into Downtown Mason City but also provide a framework for successful development within the Willow Creek Area.”

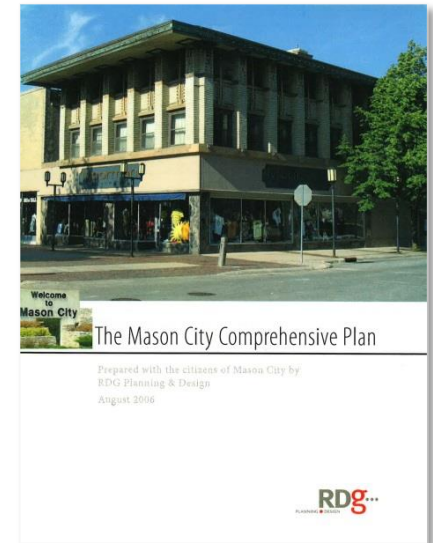
The 2004 Plan presented a land use scenario that takes advantage of the Willow Creek corridor, by recommending new development near the creek. Recommendations included housing development, mixed-use commercial, a hotel, and a Multi-Use Arena and Community Center, mostly near and along Willow Creek.

### Since 2004

This Willow Creek Master Plan 2020 updates the 2004 Plan by recognizing the changes that have occurred since 2004 and their impact on land use planning in the area. Significant events occurred after adoption of the 2004 Plan that affect the conclusions and recommendations of that plan.


### *The 2006 Comprehensive Plan and 2007 Downtown Plan*

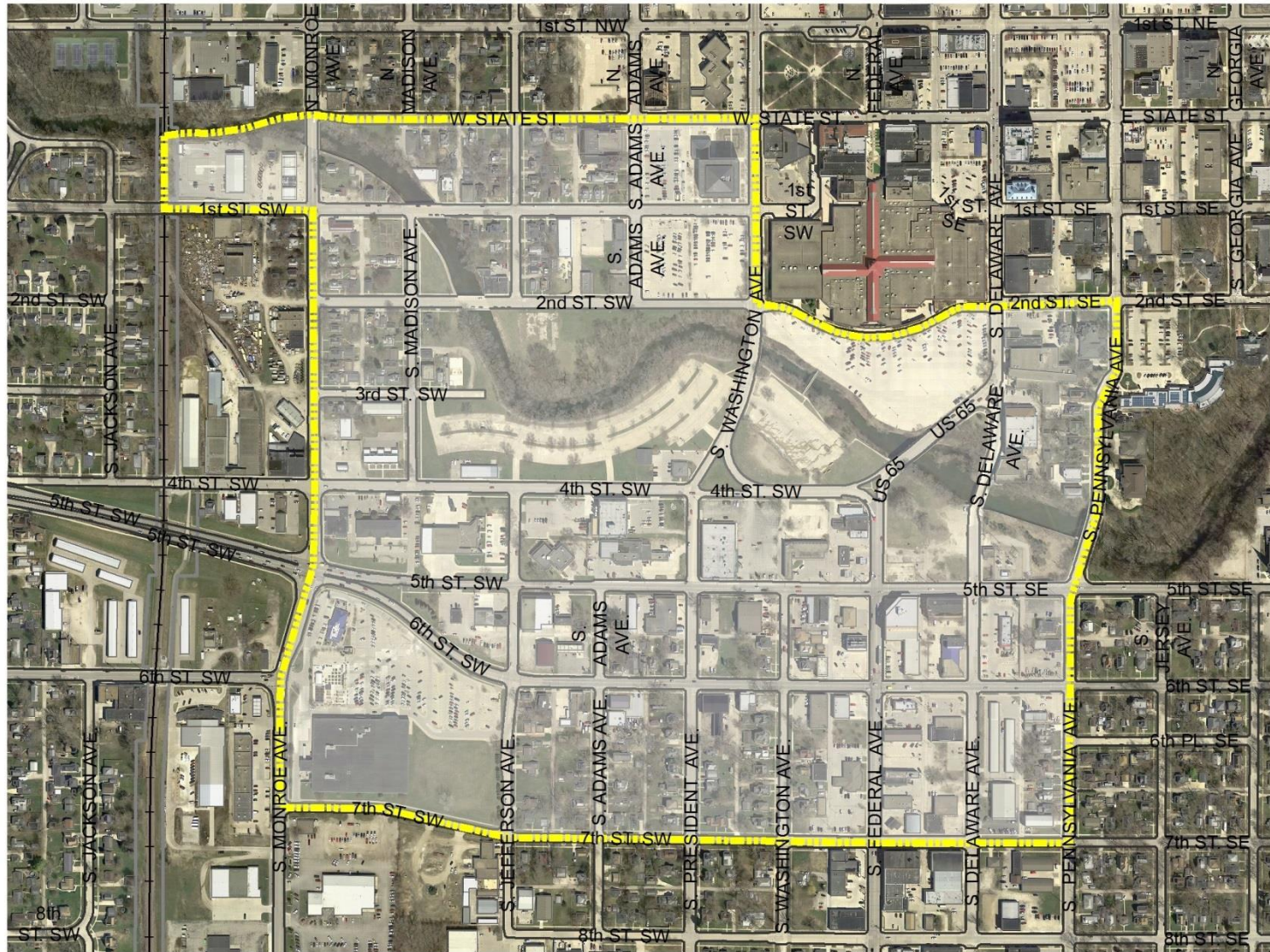
The city-wide 2006 “Mason City Comprehensive Plan” incorporates the 2004 Willow Creek Plan in its recommendations for the South Downtown neighborhood. The 2006 Plan encourages development according to the principles of “Smart Growth.” The Plan describes Smart Growth as “...a variety of techniques that allow a community to accommodate the development that the market produces, but to manage it in a way that maintains a sense of order, efficiency, and unity. Smart Growth represents a synthesis between the desire



# WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN 2020 PLANNING AREA

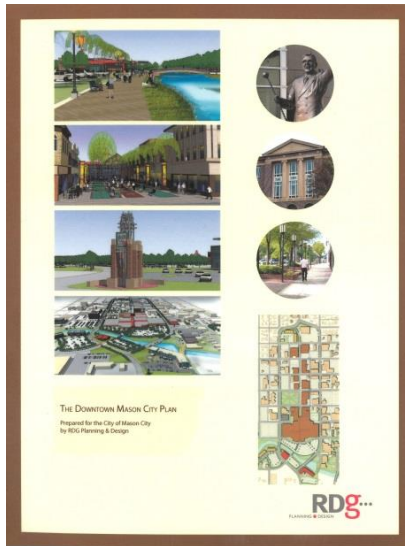


 Planning Area Boundary



1 inch = 600 feet

Map 1: Planning Area



of developers and communities to take advantage of opportunities and public benefits of environmental sensitivity, economic efficiency, and enhancement of community and civic life. The goal of Smart Growth is to implement land development principles that are profitable for developers while being community oriented, environmentally sensitive, and contributing to a fiscally strong local government.” Since the 2006 adoption of the Plan, the City still considers these principles when making land use decisions.

In 2007, the City Council adopted “The Downtown Mason City Plan” as Appendix B to the 2006 Comprehensive Plan. The Downtown Plan references and adopts the 2004 Willow Creek Plan. The Plan assumed returning the one-way streets that carry US 65 – South Delaware and South Washington avenues – to two-way thoroughfares. City and State officials now believe this is unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future.

A detailed plan for development along the creek is included. It anticipated a mixed use building near the creek and east of South Federal Avenue, a restaurant just east of South Washington Avenue, and new housing facing the creek west of South Washington. At the time, these areas were either not within the regulated floodplain, or were located where development could occur with minimal fill and flood proofing.

### **The 2008 Flood**

A catastrophic flood inundated Mason City in the summer of 2008. On Sunday, June 8, the Winnebago River crested at a record 18.57 feet; the previous record, set in 1933, was 15.7 feet. Flood stage



*Looking East from the Southbridge Mall Pedestrian Bridge, June 8, 2008*

was 7.0 feet. By noon that day, the Mason City Water Treatment Plant was flooded and the City’s water system was shut down.

Willow Creek topped its banks from its mouth at the Winnebago River all the way upstream to Clear Creek and its source in Clear Lake, eight miles to the west. Flood waters extended well beyond the regulated “100-year” floodplain.

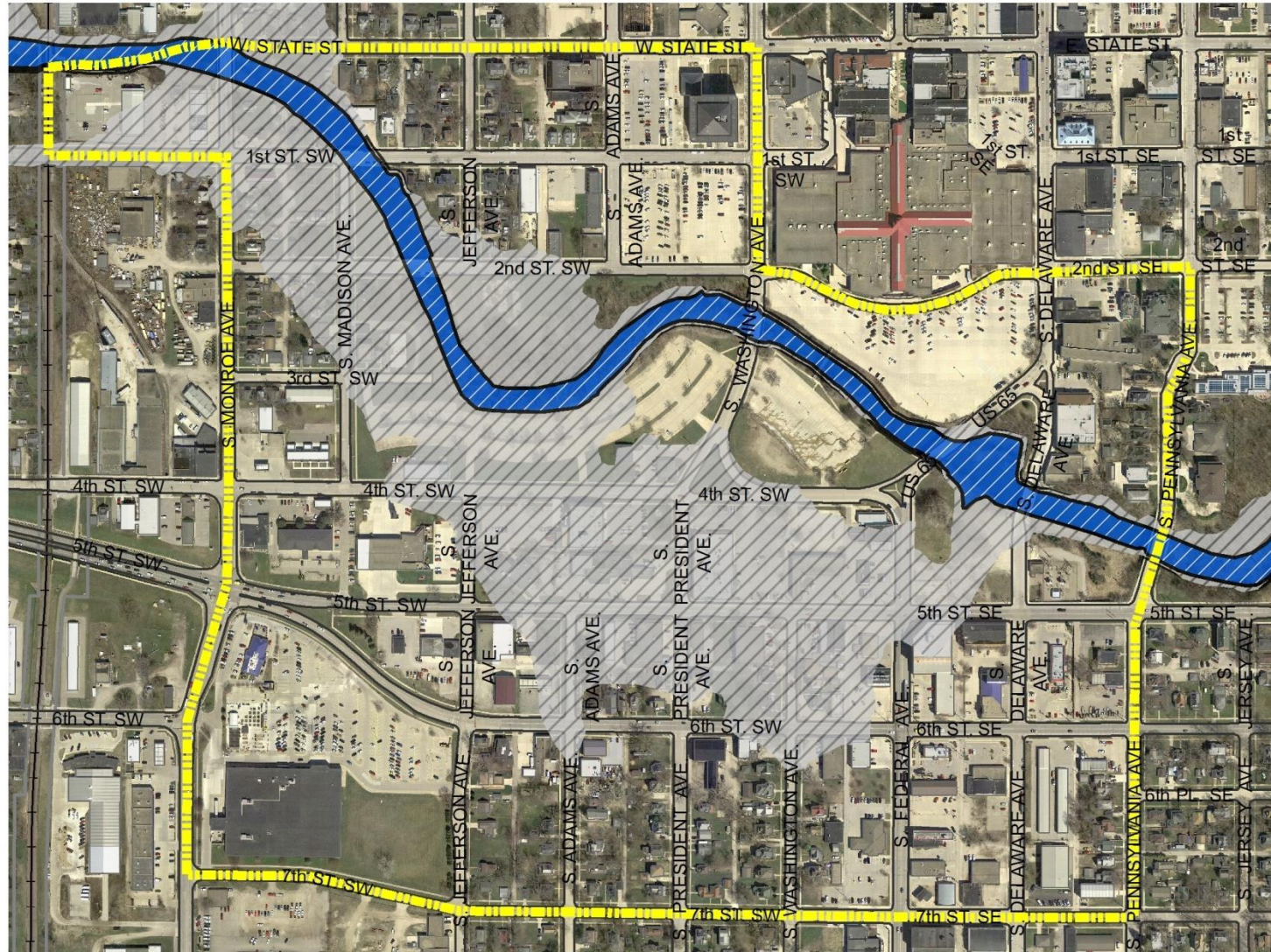
On the south side of the creek, flood waters reached as far south as 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW and beyond, inundating the entire commercial corridor along the one-way streets that carry Iowa Highway 122. Homes and businesses on South Monroe Avenue and 1<sup>st</sup> Street NW were also affected. On the north side of the creek, floodwaters impacted several businesses along 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Streets SW, West State Street, and 1<sup>st</sup> Street NW.

After the 2008 Flood, the City of Mason City participated in a voluntary buyout, with funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the US Department of Homeland

# WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN 2020 FLOODPLAIN MAP



-  FLOODWAY  
No development permitted
-  FLOODWAY FRINGE  
Regulated development permitted
-  Planning Area Boundary



Sources: City of Mason City GIS/FEMA Maps 2012 1 inch = 500 feet

Security and Emergency Management. Through these programs, the City was able to purchase 177 properties. Three businesses and 169 homes were demolished. With few exceptions, the vacant properties are deed restricted and must perpetually be kept as open space. Eleven buyout properties are located within the Willow Creek Planning Area.

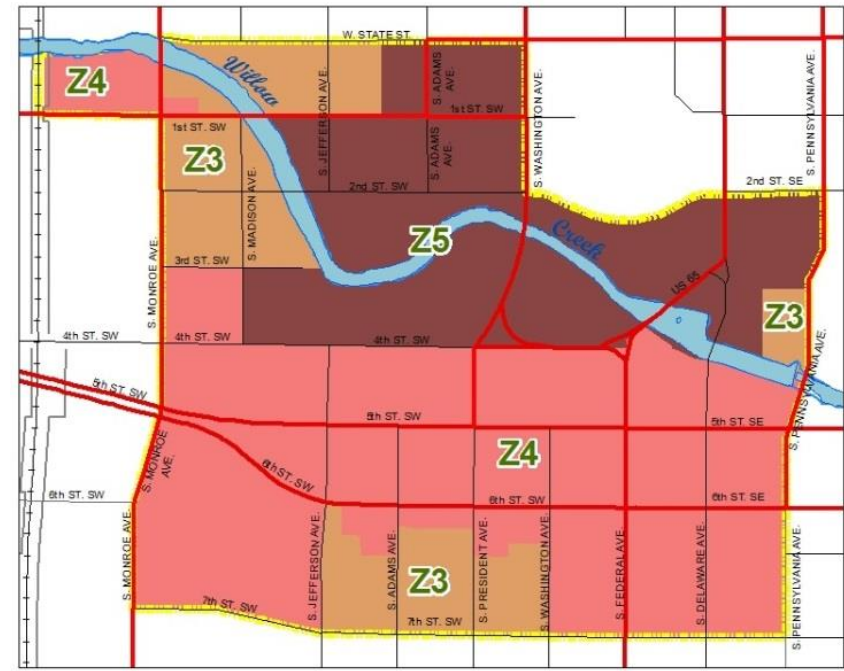
Following the flood, FEMA updated Mason City's floodplain maps in 2012. The 2008 Flood reached well beyond the floodplain boundaries shown on prior maps. The 2012 Floodplain Map (**Map 2**) shows a significant area subject to floodplain management, particularly on the south side of Willow Creek.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, several of the projects anticipated in the 2004 Plan (and subsequent plans) are no longer possible, or are unlikely to happen due to the increased costs of compliance with the floodplain regulations.

### The 2010 Zoning Ordinance

In 2009 the City began reviewing its zoning regulations. The Zoning Ordinance then in effect regulated 27 different zoning districts along with numerous planned unit developments. City staff determined that the ordinance was outdated and difficult to use and apply. To simplify the regulations and overcome slow service delivery, the new Zoning Ordinance reduced the number of zoning districts to seven and overhauled the development review process. The new, leaner zoning districts allow for a mix of land uses and encourage more compact development and walkability (see **Map 3**).

The 2010 Ordinance abandons the traditional zoning scheme and adopts a “form-based” approach. This type of zoning puts less emphasis on separating land uses and more on urban “forms” and “functions.” For instance, a building may have the *form* of a large, older home; however, the actual *function* carried on the the building may be an office or some other service business. Both the form and the function of this building are appropriate in an older neighborhood consisting of large, older homes that were originally

<sup>1</sup> In early 2020, as this Plan was being completed, FEMA issued new floodplain maps. While there were slight variations from the 2012 maps, the changes do not affect the conclusions or recommendations of this Plan.



Map 3: 2010 Planning Area Zoning Districts

built for the nuclear families of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century; thus, there is no reason to prohibit a low-intensity commercial function in an otherwise residential neighborhood. The 2010 Ordinance categorizes both forms and functions that are appropriate in each of the zoning districts. This scheme focuses more on what makes a neighborhood attractive and cohesive, and less on separating land uses from one another.

The Willow Creek Planning Area encompasses three zoning districts, which have not changed since adoption in 2010. The Z3, General Urban District permits housing at all densities. Accessory dwellings (such as an apartment constructed above a detached garage) are permitted. This district also encourages limited commercial uses (such as a small retail building, a corner office or a corner store) and “live-work” mixed use development.

The Z4, Multi-Use District is a true “mixed-use” district that allows almost any type of commercial function, along with higher-density



*"The River" Apartments, under construction on the former south mall parking lot*

residential development. Civic and institutional functions are also permitted. Commercial and residential functions on the same lot, or even in the same building, are allowed and encouraged.

The Z5 Central Business District encompasses Downtown Mason City. In this district, there are no requirements for off-street parking. Buildings must be built up to the sidewalk and there are no required side yard setbacks. The Z5 District emphasizes traditional downtown forms. Buildings may not be less than two stories high and may be as tall as ten stories. Allowed functions include those typically found downtown: retail, office, entertainment, civic, and institutional. In addition, multi-family residential, including conversion of upper story spaces to dwelling units, is allowed and encouraged. Within the planning area, there are several large areas zoned Z5 where development or redevelopment would benefit both Downtown Mason City and the city as a whole.

The main impact of the 2010 Ordinance on the Willow Creek Planning Area is that it opens up potential development that would not have been allowed by the ordinance in effect in 2004. The mixed-use zoning now allowed permits commercial functions in former residential-only areas and residential functions in former commercial-only areas. The new zoning promotes more compact

development and allows for more walkable land use patterns. This provides the City with a more varied land use "palette" on which to consider future development. This *Willow Creek Plan 2020* capitalizes on these new opportunities.

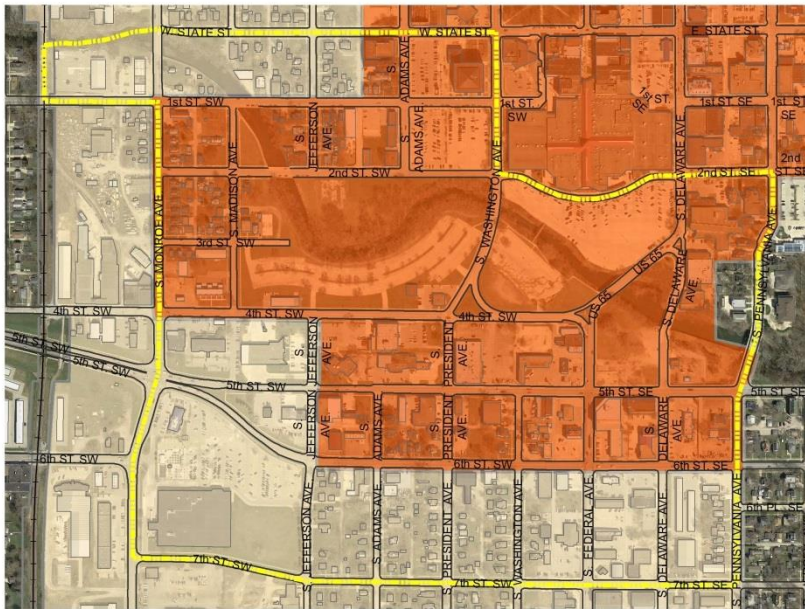
### ***Iowa's "Great Places" and "Cultural and Entertainment District" Programs***

In 2005, the State created the "Iowa Great Places" program. This program supports the development of new and existing infrastructure intended to cultivate the unique and authentic qualities of neighborhoods, communities and regions in Iowa. Mason City was among the first communities designated as a Great Place. In 2019, the City was re-designated under this program. Great Places is a portal to funding programs through the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, the Iowa Economic Development Authority, and others. As part of the 2019 application, the City emphasized the Willow Creek corridor near downtown as a focus for future Iowa Great Places efforts. This plan recommends revisiting the Great Places plan to ensure that both plans are consistent with one another.

Downtown Mason City was also designated as a Cultural and Entertainment District in 2005, and re-designated in 2019. One of eight downtowns so designated, this program recognizes well-identified, walkable, mixed-use, and compact areas of a city or county in which a high concentration of cultural facilities serves as the anchor. Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs staff provides technical assistance to Cultural & Entertainment Districts, including communication on grant opportunities, professional development workshops and best practices from other Cultural & Entertainment Districts. Again, development of Willow Creek was a major emphasis in the re-designation effort.

### ***Urban Renewal Plans***

Almost all of the planning area is within an urban renewal area (URA), and has been since 2001 (see **Map 4**). In Iowa, urban renewal allows a city to designate areas that are eligible to receive assistance for blight elimination, low- to moderate-income housing, and



Planning Area Boundary  
 Downtown Reinvestment Urban Renewal Area  
 Mason City Unified Urban Renewal Area

Map 4: Urban Renewal Areas

economic development. The most powerful tool available in an urban renewal area is Tax Increment Financing (TIF). This financing tool allows the City to capture the tax “increment,” or the increased taxes that result from development. The City can use these funds for development incentives such as grants, loans, or tax rebates, or can use them to improve infrastructure or provide low- to moderate income housing.

The Mason City Unified Urban Renewal Area was created in 2013 when several existing URAs were combined into a single area. In 2016, the City removed the downtown area from the Unified URA and placed it in the new Downtown Reinvestment Urban Renewal Area. Additional portions of the Unified area were transferred to the Downtown Reinvestment URA in 2019.

Unlike the Unified area, which is focused on economic development incentives and will expire in 2021, the Downtown Reinvestment

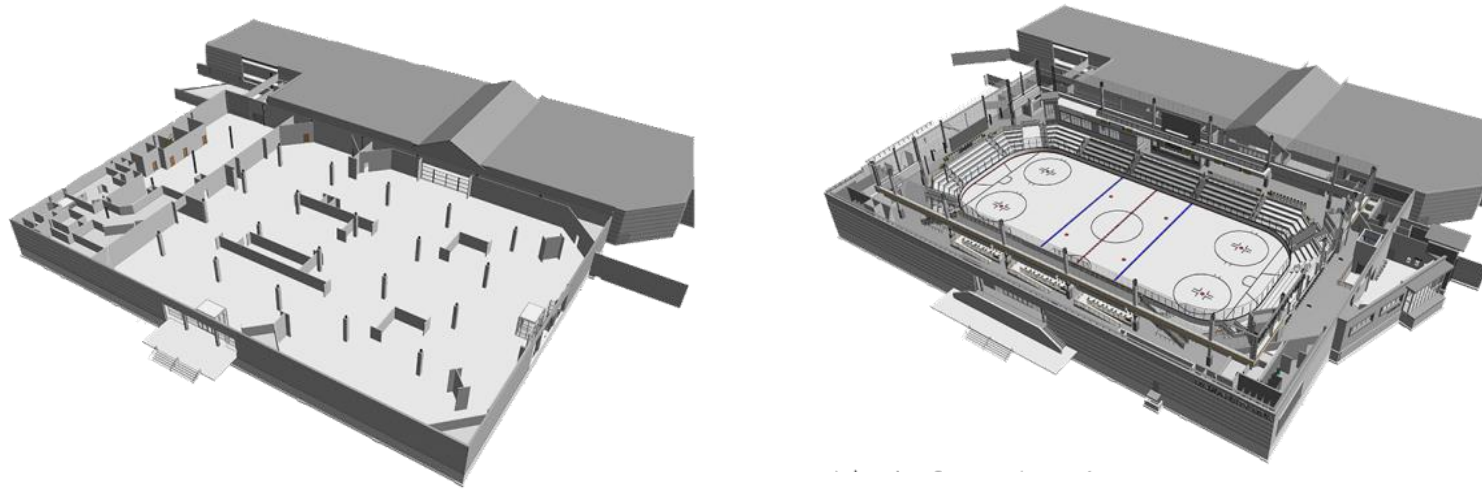
URA is focused on blight elimination and has no expiration. The expansion of the Downtown Reinvestment URA into the southern portion of the planning area provides additional financing opportunities for housing and redevelopment, particularly in the flood-prone areas where development costs can be higher. Multi-residential development (3 units or more) in this area is eligible for a 10-year, 100 percent tax abatement. This will help to keep rents competitive for new development.

### River City Renaissance

In 2015, the Iowa Economic Development Authority approved Mason City’s application to the Iowa Reinvestment District Program. This program aims to revitalize downtowns by reinvesting property and excise tax revenues into a new downtown hotel and other public amenities.



Architectural Rendering, Mason City Multi-Purpose Arena (Opened December, 2019)



*Conversion of the former J. C. Penney store in Southbridge Mall (left) into the Mason City Multi-Purpose Arena (right) Source: ICON Architects*

Mason City’s “River City Renaissance” project includes:

- Converting a former anchor store space in Southbridge Mall to a multi-purpose arena
- Construction of a new, “select-service” hotel in the parking lot adjacent to the Mall, including a large ballroom.
- Conversion of The Music Man Square on South Delaware Avenue to a full-service conference and convention center, with upgrades to the Meredith Willson Museum collection.
- A skywalk over South Delaware Avenue to connect the new hotel to the Music Man Conference Center
- Reconfiguring the north entrance of Southbridge Mall into an indoor/outdoor performing arts pavilion.

As of the writing of this Plan, the multi-purpose arena is nearing completion, and negotiations with an established hotel and conference center development company are ongoing. This project has focused a lot of attention on the Downtown and has attracted some new developers. In spring 2019, the City approved a plan for a four-story, 113-unit apartment building and 20 adjacent townhouse units on the former “lower” Mall parking lot. The developers chose this location due to its proximity to Downtown and the River City Renaissance projects, and its location on Willow Creek (and because this site is one of the few near the Creek that is not within the

regulated Floodway Fringe). This project also takes advantage of new “Opportunity Zone” tax benefits. A large portion of the study area is within the Mason City Opportunity Zone.

## Planning Process

With renewed interest in developing the Willow Creek Corridor, the Planning and Zoning Commission began working on a new Willow Creek Master Plan in May, 2019. The Commission guided City staff on drafts of this plan, and approved an initial draft for public review on January 14, 2020.

The City displayed initial drafts and recommendations at a public workshop on January 30, 2020, at the new Parks and Recreation meeting facilities in Southbridge Mall. Approximately 50 attendees viewed displays explaining the Plan goals and action steps, and the plan recommendations found in Chapter 3. The Appendix includes comments and other results of the workshop.

The Planning and Zoning Commission completed a final review of the Plan and recommended approval on March 24, 2020. The City Council adopted the Willow Creek Master Plan 2020 on April 7, 2020 with Resolution #20-63. A copy of the adopting resolution is in the Appendix.



## CHAPTER 2 PLANNING CONTEXT

The Willow Creek Plan area is a mix of residential and commercial uses, with some service and light industrial uses along the edges. Iowa Highway 122 (formerly US 18) is Mason City's primary east-west highway, carrying traffic through the plan area along the one-way streets on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Streets SE/SW. The primary north-south arterial is South Federal Avenue, which is designated US Highway 65. This highway splits into north- and southbound one-way streets as it traverses the Downtown area.

Willow Creek is the dominant natural feature within the planning area. Although there have been attempts to highlight the creek and integrate it into the neighborhood (such as the initial construction of the Willow Creek Trail), the creek corridor appears to be a forgotten element, with development "turning its back" on the creek rather than celebrating this unique and potentially beautiful green corridor.

**Map 5** is a generalized analysis of area land uses and how they transition to the surrounding neighborhoods. This 2020 Willow Creek Plan does not anticipate major changes to the general land use pattern from the 2004 Plan. However, the 2008 Flood and other factors impacted several blocks within the study area. Chapter 3 contains an analysis of those areas along with recommendations for development and redevelopment.

### Existing Forms and Functions

**Map 5** shows the forms and functions within existing buildings and the use or potential use of the vacant parcels. The large parking area on the south side of Willow Creek, while technically not vacant, may also be a redevelopment site if it can be developed according to floodplain management requirements.

The planning area is predominantly commercial, particularly along the major road corridors. Residential uses line the north and south fringes. Overall, the area has a transitional "road-into-town" feel;



*Letts, Spencer & Smith Co. Warehouse, southeast corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Street SE and South Federal Avenue*

the original function of the main roads was to funnel traffic to the downtown core.

Since Highways 65 and 122 were originally regional arterial routes, much of the development is highway oriented, directed towards travelers passing through the city. With the later construction of Interstate 35 and the Avenue of the Saints/US 18, these roads no longer function as regional arterials. Thus, much of the development along the corridors looks to be from a bygone time, and not all of it has transitioned well to current realities.

### Transportation

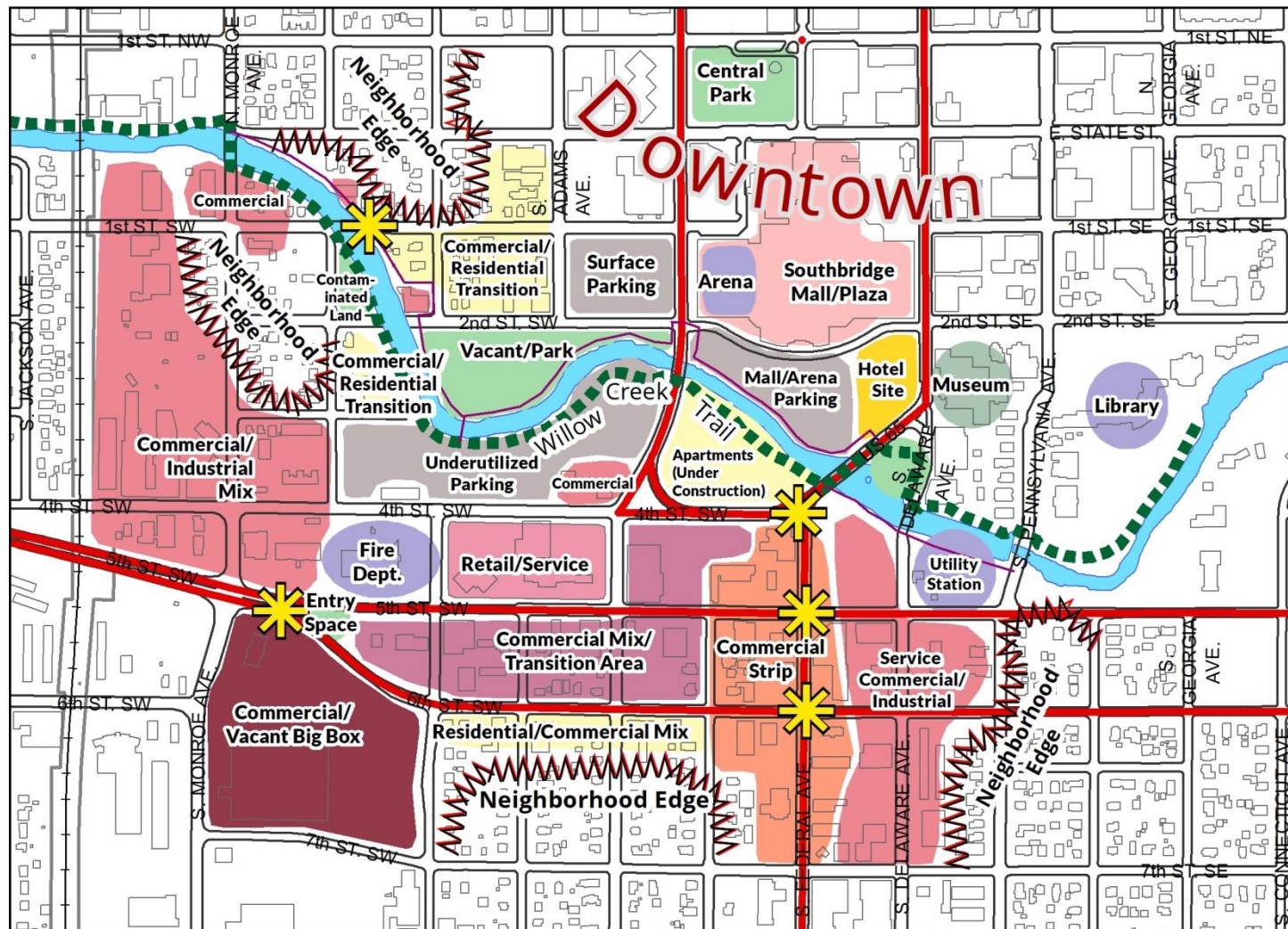
**Map 7** shows the Federal Functional Classifications of the roads within the planning area. At the time that this plan was prepared, the Iowa Department of Transportation was completing a major reconstruction of the IA 122 corridor through the planning area. Iowa 122 consists of two one-way streets: 5<sup>th</sup> Street SE/SW carries westbound traffic, and 6<sup>th</sup> Street SE/SW carries eastbound traffic. Upon completion of the reconstruction, each street will have two through lanes and a 5-foot bike lane, with turn lanes at major intersections.

In 2001, the City commissioned a Realignment Study of the IA 122 traffic pattern in the heart of the city. The completion of the Avenue of the Saints/US 18 freeway south of the city in 1999 drew traffic away from the central corridor, calling into question the need for

# WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN 2020

## AREA ANALYSIS

-  Arterial Corridors
-  Willow Creek Trail
-  Downtown Gateways
















Map 5: Willow Creek Area Analysis

1 inch = 600 feet







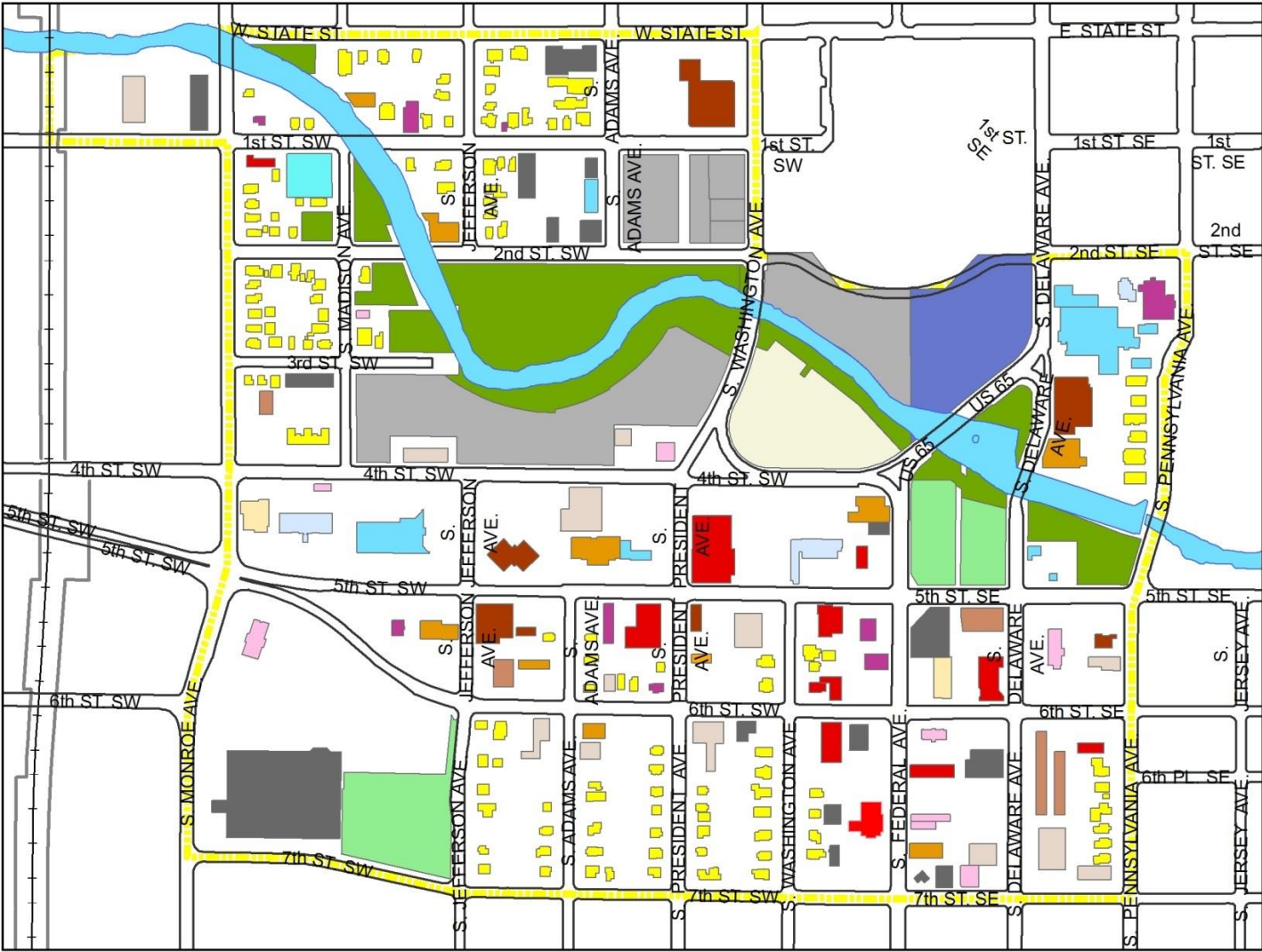
# WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN 2020 EXISTING FORMS AND FUNCTIONS

-  Planning Area Boundary
  
- Buildings**

  -  Automotive service
  -  Civic
  -  Financial
  -  Lodging
  -  Mixed use
  -  Office
  -  Office/retail
  -  Residential
  -  Restaurant
  -  Retail
  -  Service (business)
  -  Service (personal)
  -  Storage
  -  Vacant building
  -  Parking

  
- Vacant Parcels**

  -  Community garden
  -  Future Lodging
  -  Future Residential
  -  Open Space/Parks
  -  Developable



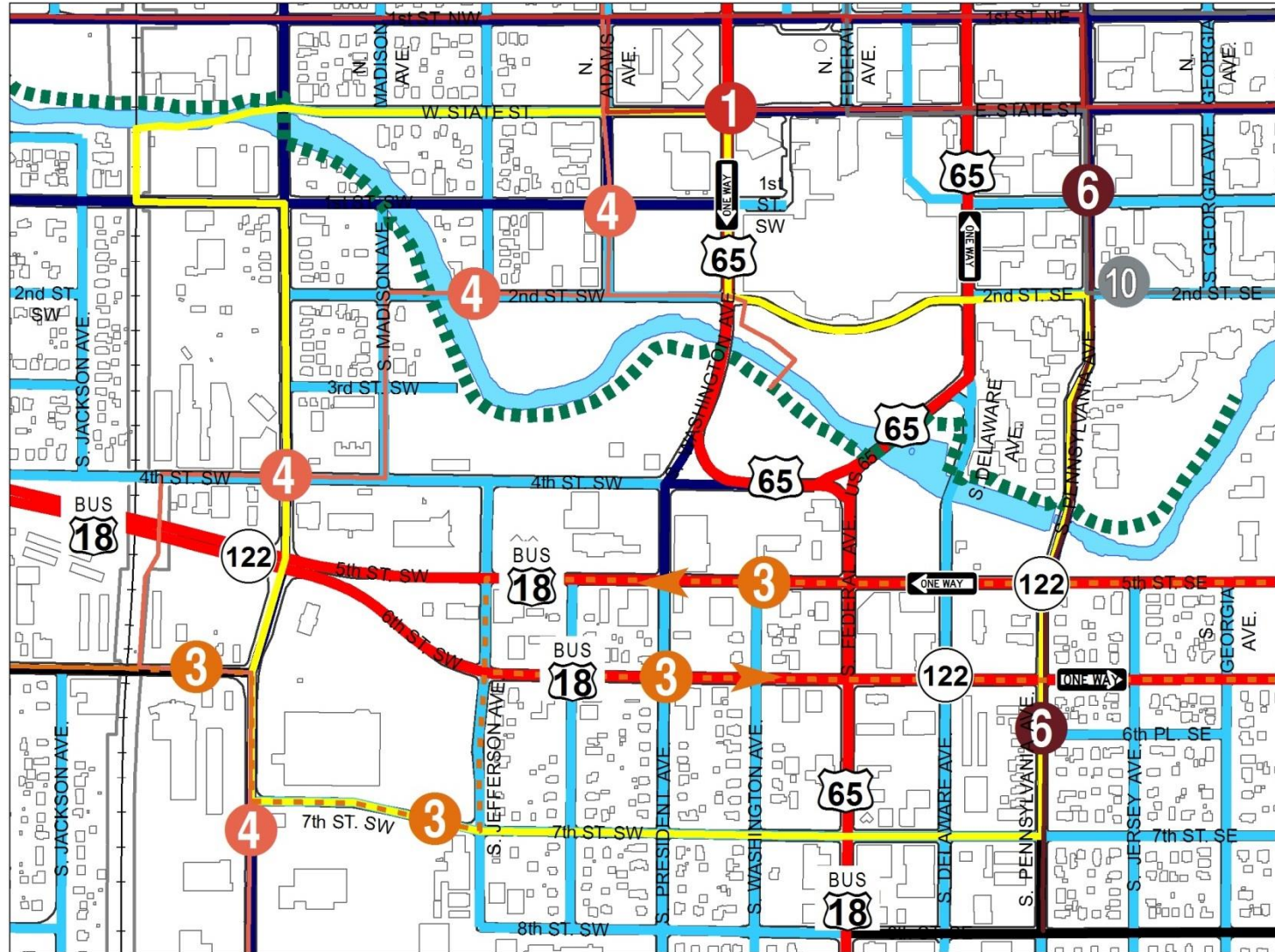
1 inch = 500 feet

Map 6: Existing Forms and Functions

# WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN 2020 ROAD, BIKEWAY AND TRAIL NETWORK



-  Willow Creek Planning Area
-  Principal Arterial
-  Local
-  Collector
-  Minor Arterial
-  Willow Creek Trail
-  3 Bikeway Routes
-  3 Future Bikeway Routes



Map 7: Road, Bikeway and Trail Network

1 inch = 600 feet

the paired one way, east-west traffic using Highway 122. The 2001 Realignment Study considered replacing the one-way pair with a single four-lane roadway. Based on the buildings and land uses along 5<sup>th</sup> Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Street, the Realignment Study recommended creating this new corridor down 6<sup>th</sup> Street. The study also recommended realigning the southbound section of US 65 along South Washington Avenue, eliminating the tight left curve at 4<sup>th</sup> Street SW with a smooth curve through the existing lower Southbridge Mall parking lot.

Business owners on 5<sup>th</sup> Street were understandably against this plan. After considerable debate, the City Council decided not to eliminate the one-way pattern. Later studies allowed for improvements to the corridor (the tight “s-curve” joining the streets at the east end of the corridor, outside of the study area, is being upgraded as part of the 2019 reconstruction), but the one-way system on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Streets remains intact. In addition, the multi-family devel-

opment currently under construction on the former lower Mall parking lot precludes any significant change to the alignment of South Washington Avenue.

Discussions regarding the Highway 122 Corridor were ongoing at the time of the 2004 Willow Creek Master Plan. Therefore, the various planning alternatives in that Plan reflected the alternatives proposed by the Realignment Study. Since those alternatives are no longer probable, this 2020 Plan focuses on the impact of the existing road network on both current and future land use.

In 2012, IDOT began design for an upgraded Highway 122 through the planning area. The approved plan included narrowing the streets to two travel lanes and adding 5-foot bike lanes. The narrower streets allow for safer turning movements from the side streets due to improved sight lines. The project also includes upgraded curb, sidewalks, and sidewalk ramps at intersections. The curve joining 6<sup>th</sup> Street SE with 5<sup>th</sup> Street SE, just west of South Caroline Avenue, is considerably smoother and much safer. Construction began in 2018 and was reopened to traffic in November, 2019.

In 2014, the City adopted “Activating Mason City: A Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan.” This plan provides for both off-street trails and a marked, on-street bikeway system, designed to get cyclists to major activity centers on the safest routes. The plan anticipated the bike lanes on Highway 122 and plans an extension of Route 3 along both streets. **Map 7** shows the existing and planned bikeway routes within the planning area. The Willow Creek Trail is also an important transportation element within this corridor. Chapter 3 includes recommendations for improvements to the trail and the overall cycling and pedestrian experience along the Willow Creek corridor. Relevant exhibits from the Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan can be found in the Appendix.

## Zoning Requirements

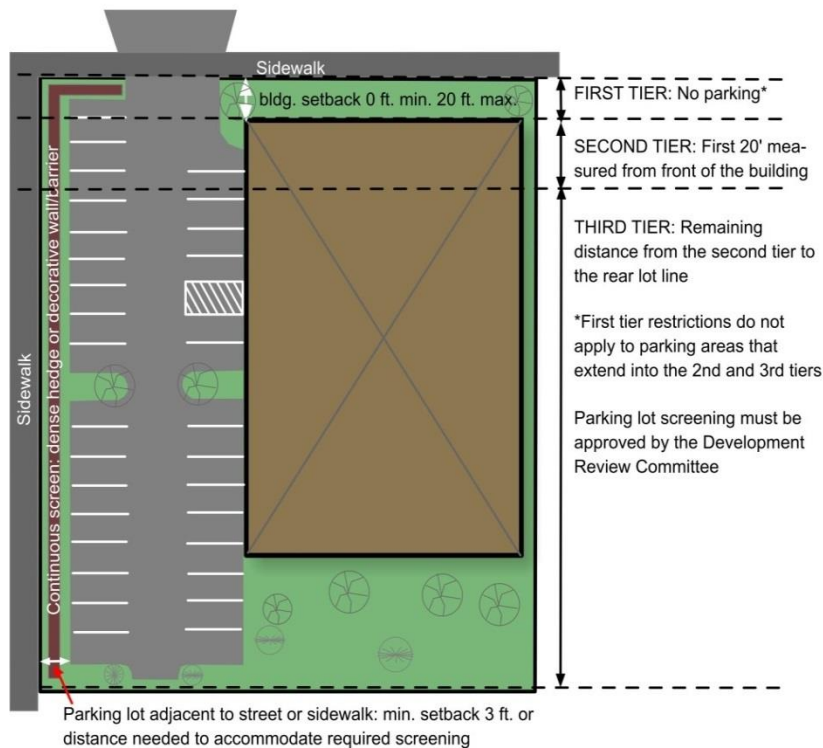
The 2010 Zoning Ordinance allows for a much greater variety of land uses within the planning area. Most of the Z4, Multi-Use District within this area is also within the Z4 Corridor Overlay District



*"Activating Mason City," adopted February, 2014*

(see Section 12-12-7.B of the Zoning Ordinance). The overlay district imposes requirements beyond the typical Z4 regulations to preserve the historic mixed use, pedestrian nature of the corridors. Development in the Corridor Overlay District must have paved parking lots, and parking lots cannot be located between the front of the building and the sidewalk (referred to in the Ordinance as the “first tier”). Dense landscaping, a decorative masonry wall, or a similar architectural barrier must screen parking areas adjacent to streets and sidewalks (see graphic below).

As noted above, the zoning districts within the planning area allow for a mix of forms and functions and encourage walkability. Resi-



**Z4 Corridor Overlay District Parking Requirements:** these regulations preserve the historic, street-oriented character of forms and functions on the highway corridors.

dential and commercial/office uses can be located on the same parcel, or even within the same building. Forms and functions within the Z5, Central Business District, are not required to provide off-street parking. There is adequate public parking on the streets as well as within several downtown public parking lots serving the Downtown area. There is a challenge for residential uses, however, as many tenants desire to have cars and need a place to park them. The City should work with downtown residential developers to allow tenants to use public parking areas if there is not adequate private space for parking.

## Floodplain Regulations

Chapter 12-18 of the Zoning Ordinance provides floodplain management regulations for the City. The purpose of these regulations is “to protect and preserve the rights, privileges and property of Mason City and its residents and to preserve and improve the peace, safety, health, welfare, and comfort and convenience of its residents by minimizing flood losses with provisions designed to:

- Reserve sufficient floodplain area for the conveyance of flood flows so that flood heights and velocities will not be increase substantially.
- Restrict or prohibit forms and functions that are dangerous to health, safety or property in times of flood or that cause excessive increases in flood heights or velocities.
- Require that forms and functions vulnerable to floods, including public facilities that serve such uses, be protected against flood damage at the time of initial construction or substantial improvement.
- Protect individuals from buying lands that may not be suited for intended purposes because of flood hazard.
- Assure that eligibility is maintained for property owners in the community to purchase flood insurance through the national flood insurance program.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Section 12-18-1 of the Zoning Ordinance

The regulations adopt the National Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs) to determine the boundaries of the regulated areas. As shown on **Map 2**, the Floodway Fringe Overlay District incorporates both the “100-year” floodplain (designated Zone AE on the FIRM) and the “500-year” floodplain (Shaded Zone X on the FIRM ).<sup>3</sup>

Communities that participate in the National Flood Insurance Program are required, at minimum, to regulate land use within Zone AE. Financial institutions typically require flood insurance only for property within this zone. The City amended the Floodplain Regulations in 2006 to extend the regulations applying to Zone AE to the Shaded Zone X floodplain areas. Thus, development within the entire Floodway Fringe district is subject to the same development requirements.

For new development, this has major implications. The lowest floor of any new structure must be at least three feet above the base flood level. Generally, the way to meet this requirement is to place fill on the site to elevate the grade above the base flood elevation. However, the regulations state that fill may not cover more than 20 percent of the area within a lot that is in the Floodway Fringe Overlay District.

For example, if all of a 10,000 square-foot lot lies in the Floodway Fringe, fill can cover only 2,000 square feet of the surface area of that lot. In addition, for residential uses, the filled portion that is at least 3 feet above the base flood level must extend at least 18 feet out in every direction from the new structure, before the fill may slope down to the pre-existing grade. This further limits how much filled area a structure can utilize, and may prevent *any* new residential development, especially on smaller lots.

Existing buildings within the Floodway Fringe can continue to operate as presently; however, a structure that is “substantially im-

<sup>3</sup> Terms such as “100-year flood” relate to the statistical probability that a flood of a particular magnitude will occur during a year; it does not mean that these floods occur only once every 100 years.



*North side of Willow Creek, near the South Pennsylvania Avenue bridge*

proved” (including any new additions to the building) must comply with the Floodplain Management requirements. Floors that are below the base flood elevation can be used only for storage; lower levels can be used for parking if flood waters have passage in and through the below-grade space. All mechanical, electrical, and plumbing equipment must be “designed or located so as to prevent water from entering or accumulating within the components during conditions of flooding.”<sup>4</sup> In most cases, this means elevating all of the utility equipment out of the lowest floor and at least three feet above the base flood elevation. While not every improvement to an existing building meets the definition of a “substantial improvement,” these requirements can be a deterrent to making necessary major improvements to existing buildings in the Floodway Fringe.

The Zoning Board of Adjustment may consider variances to these requirements in very limited circumstances, but the rules provide a necessary safeguard to protect against flooding for the large Floodway Fringe area south of Willow Creek. However, the increase in flooding safety comes at a cost to the ability to develop or redevelop land in buildings within the study area. This is an im-

<sup>4</sup> Zoning Ordinance, Section 12-18-3.B.5.c



Sections of Willow Creek with channelized concrete floodwalls, and locations of open spaces and parks along the corridor



Concrete floodwall on the south side of Willow Creek, between the South Monroe Avenue and 2nd Street SW bridges (looking south)

portant consideration for planning within the Willow Creek corridor.

## Willow Creek Profile

The creek no longer flows naturally through the corridor. Replacement of the natural creek bank with concrete floodwalls is the most visible alteration. Some of these walls are part of bridge structures, while others support the soil below structures directly adjacent to the creek. Many of those structures were demolished after the 2008 Flood, so several of the floodwalls are along lots that are now vacant.

The remaining natural sections of the creek banks contain thick growth of trees and brush, often on steep slopes. Brush also grows from sediment along the wall edges where water levels are low. This makes the creek banks mostly inaccessible and prevents pedestri-

ans from being close to the water. There are also a few small islands in the channel with trees and brush growing on them.

All of the bridges have sidewalks on both sides, allowing views up and down the creek. Beginning at the South Monroe Avenue Bridge and proceeding east, the Willow Creek Trail is on the south side of the creek. The trail passes under the bridge at South Washington Avenue. It crosses to the north side of the creek via the US 65 Northbound bridge and continues west across South Delaware Avenue before passing under the South Pennsylvania Avenue bridge. The trail ends at a stairway that leads up the bluff to the east side of the Public Library. A pedestrian bridge also connects the under-construction apartment complex to the Southbridge Mall parking lot. Chapter 3 includes several recommendations for enhancements to the Willow Creek Trail.

There are several City-owned parcels along the corridor, including three designated public parks. At the western end of the corridor,



there are three areas of contiguous lots owned by the City after the flood buyout, which must remain perpetual open space. Further downstream, Norris Park is on the north side of the creek, on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW just west of South Washington Avenue. This area contains open space and a grove of mature trees along the creek. West of Norris Park is land owned by the City, but not designated as park land. Recommendations for future use of this area are included in Chapter 3.

West Interstate Park, located west of South Delaware Avenue, is accessible only by a stairway from South Delaware. This small open space is an intimate and surprisingly quiet hideaway, beneath the level of the streets. Unfortunately, the hidden aspect of this park



*West Interstate Park*

that makes it unique has also been its downfall. Park lights and other amenities have been vandalized, as it is difficult for law enforcement and others to see what is happening within the park.

East Interstate Park is on the east side of South Delaware Avenue and contains the easternmost portion of the Willow Creek Trail. Except for the trail corridor, this park is wooded and contains the steep slopes that lead up to the Public Library and MacNider Museum.



*Former Interstate Power dam beneath the South Delaware Avenue Bridge*

Beneath Pennsylvania Avenue, an old dam once provided energy to the Interstate Power plant on the south side of the creek. The plant was demolished long ago, but an Alliant Energy electrical substation is still located on this site. The dam slows the creek flow, but does not control flooding.

Several storm sewer outlets empty into Willow Creek along the corridor. These sewers directly drain nearby streets, parking lots, and adjacent land uses. This affects water quality, as there are no natural filters to remove sand, sediment, and automotive effluents before reaching the creek.

The creek provides wet areas for birds and other animals. There is little evidence of fish population, other than minnows and similar small species. The Parker's Mill dam downstream inhibits most fish from migrating into the creek from the Winnebago River.

As noted above, Willow Creek seems to be a forgotten element; a premier natural feature that has been ignored by surrounding development. The new apartment complex under construction pro-

poses to remove the brush and volunteer trees along the south side of the creek adjacent to the development, providing a better experience for the apartment dwellers and the public. This Plan provides an implementation program as the City realizes the value of the creek as a public amenity.

## Planning Goals

The planning context outlined above provides a framework for determining the goals of this Master Plan. These goals are the basis for the recommendations in Chapter 3 and the Implementation Plan in Chapter 4.

The Planning and Zoning Commission developed these goals following discussion and debate considering the existing land use, transportation, regulatory, and natural features context of the corridor. Each goal represents a high-level view of long range planning and land use within the corridor. Following each goal are several objectives that are achievable through an action-oriented implementation plan. Chapter 4 describes several implementation strategies.

### **Goal 1: Improve Access to Willow Creek**

- a. Clean up the brush and volunteer trees along the creek to improve views and allow direct access to the shoreline.
- b. Provide “focus areas” along the creek waterfront, such as accessible decks over the water, allowing pedestrians to interact with the riparian corridor.
- c. Provide easy and accessible entry to the waterfront, so that persons of all ages and abilities can enjoy its natural features.

### **Goal 2: Improve the Willow Creek Trail**

- a. Resurface the trail where needed, and keep it clear of debris.
- b. Add crosswalks at street crossings to direct cyclists and pedestrians to the next section of the trail.
- c. Improve trail crossings at the bridges, particularly at South Monroe Avenue.
- d. Add safety improvements, such as vandal-proof lighting, police call boxes at necessary locations, etc.



*Storm sewer draining the Mall parking lot directly into Willow Creek*

- e. Connect the Trail to the wider area trail system, particularly the new Highline Trail to the east.

### **Goal 3: Integrate the Willow Creek Corridor into Downtown Mason City**

- a. Extend the Downtown public art and sculpture program to the Willow Creek Corridor
- b. Add lighting to the bridges, to make them safer to cross, while also making them aesthetically attractive.
- c. Seek traditional downtown-type businesses that take advantage of the creekside/trailside location: restaurants, taverns, bike shops, etc. Provide opportunities for existing businesses to be oriented to the creek.
- d. Connect the creek corridor to Downtown via marked trails and sidewalks.

**Goal 4: Encourage Development that Meets the Floodplain Regulations**

- a. Plan for mixed use and multi-residential development that takes advantage of views of and proximity to the creek.
- b. Provide assistance (financial and expertise) to property owners wishing to develop or redevelop property within the Floodway Fringe.
- c. Ensure adequate parking, while preserving the character of the corridor and protecting the creek from runoff.

**Goal 5: Raise Awareness of the Importance of the Willow Creek Corridor**

- a. Create a “Friends of Willow Creek” organization, to concentrate on improvements along the creek, to maintain the corridor, and advocate for keeping the Willow Creek corridor clean and safe.
- b. Seek and maintain partnerships with local organizations with a stake in the future of Willow Creek, such as Main Street Mason City. Work with area education organizations, such as the North Iowa Area Community College, Mason City Schools, and the two parochial schools systems, to encourage public access to the creek and develop and promote programs that bring people to the corridor.
- c. Plan programs and events along the creek and within public spaces, such as Norris Park and West Interstate Park. Use these events to raise awareness of the importance and uniqueness of the corridor.

**Goal 6: Improve Water Quality**

- a. Consider low impact design methods with new development or redevelopment.
- b. Conduct a watershed study to determine sources of pollution or sedimentation and propose strategies for mitigation.

**Goal 7: Improve the Highway Corridors**

- a. Design and install lighting, landscaping, gateway elements, and wayfinding signs that improve the user’s experience of the IA

- 122 and US 65 corridors and provide directions to Downtown. These improvements should reflect a common theme that celebrates Mason City’s musical and architectural brand.
- b. Focus code enforcement and nuisance abatement efforts to the highway corridors to create and maintain a positive impression of Mason City, particularly for first time visitors or pass-through motorists.
- c. Integrate mixed use development into the corridors, especially along the IA 122 one-way pair, to encourage walkability and provide employees and patrons for area businesses.



*Willow Creek Trail, on the south side of Willow Creek near 3rd Street SW*

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## CHAPTER 3 FUTURE LAND USE

The Willow Creek corridor, as it passes near Downtown, is a major contributor to Mason City's "River City" brand. The city's connection to music and Meredith Willson's "The Music Man," along with its strong architectural heritage, makes Willow Creek an essential element in celebrating the city's heritage and character. Enhancing the "River City" experience for motorists, pedestrians, and cyclists helps to cement Mason City's unique brand.

This chapter outlines recommendations for future development and improvements along the Willow Creek Corridor. These recommendations advance the goals and actions listed in the previous chapter.

### Land Use Plan

**Map 8** depicts a long-range land use plan for properties within the planning area. Many of the land use recommendations reflect the existing land use pattern; this assumes that the current land use and the existing forms and functions are appropriate, both now and in the future. The plan identifies areas subject to floodplain regulation (hatched areas). This affects potential development and poses challenges on certain properties. Impacts and recommendations for development in these areas are included in this chapter.

### Land Use Categories

**Map 8** shows six categories of future land use. Each category anticipates both maintaining appropriate existing forms and functions and recommending future changes that implement the goals and objectives of this Plan.

#### Parks/Open Space:

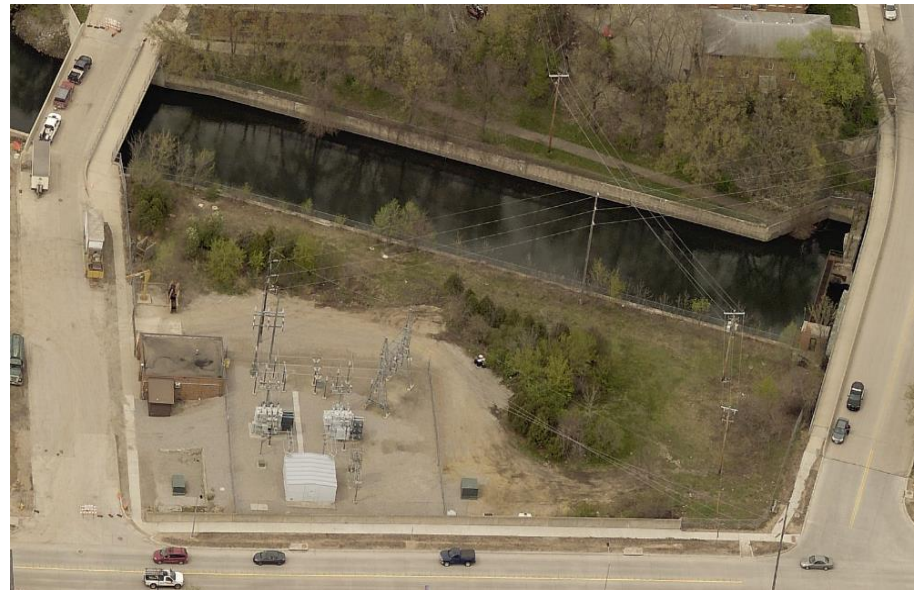
The **Parks and Open Space** category includes the buyout areas owned by the City, designated parks, and green spaces along the Creek corridor. Included in this designation is land on the south side of the creek that Interstate Power (Alliant Energy) owns. This lot once contained a large power generating plant. While Alliant maintains a power substation on the property, much of the site is unused.

This area presents an opportunity to develop additional open space along the creek, as commercial or residential development near the power substation would not be appropriate.

The Parks and Open Space designation also anticipates maintaining a greenbelt along both sides of the creek, where possible. This facilitates both the existing Willow Creek Trail and provides additional opportunities for pedestrians and cyclists to have access and views along the riparian corridor. A more detailed discussion of creekside improvements follows later in this chapter.

#### Commercial:

The **Commercial** designation comprises two areas within Downtown Mason City. The block bounded by West State Street, 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW, South Washington Avenue, and South Adams Avenue










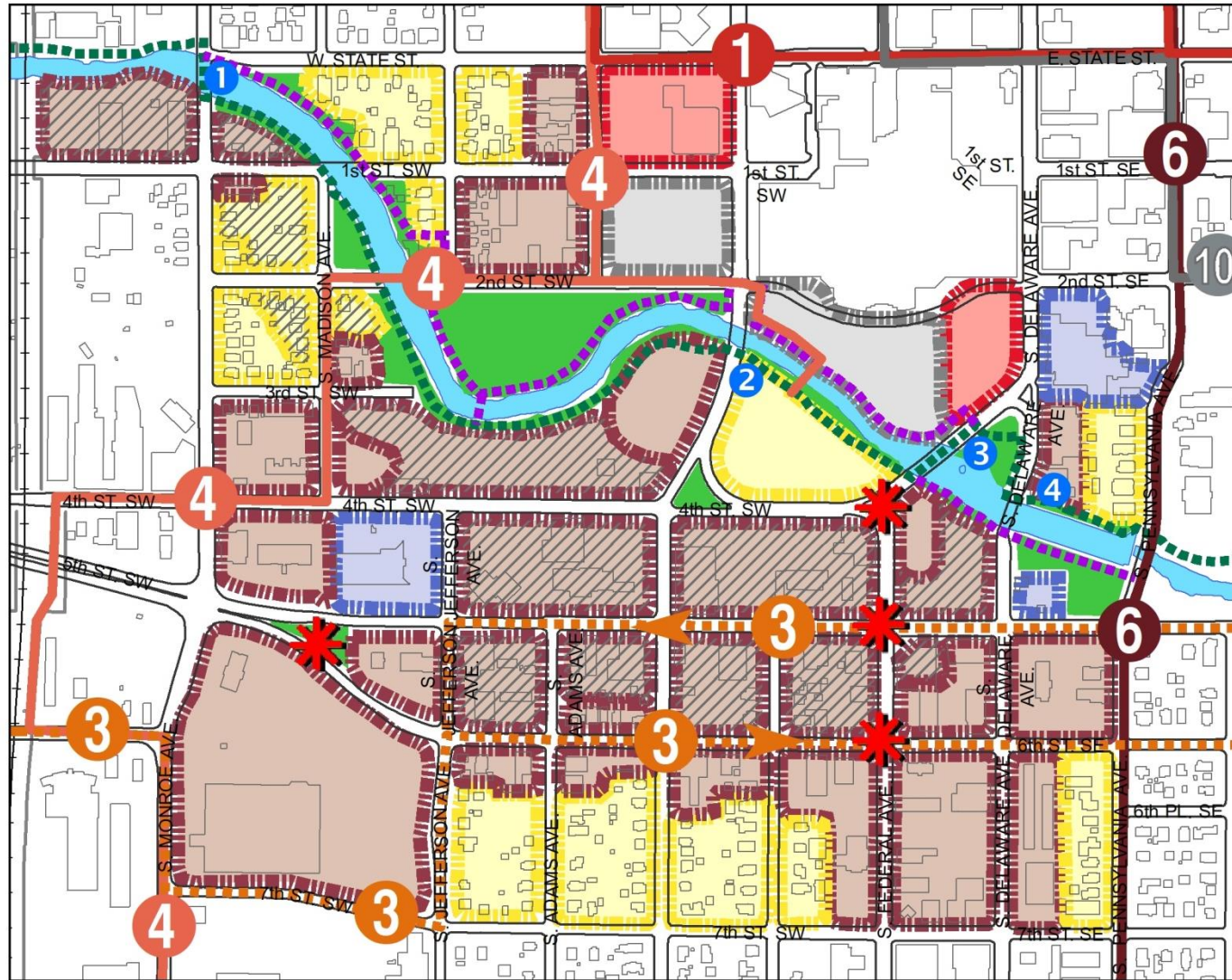
*Birds-eye view of the Interstate Power (Alliant Energy) land on the south side of Willow Creek, looking north*

# WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN 2020

## LAND USE PLAN



-  On-Street Bike Routes
-  Future Bike Routes
-  Existing Trail
-  Proposed Trail
-  Park/Open Space
-  Commercial
-  Mixed Use
-  Residential
-  Parking
-  Public
-  Developable Areas Subject to Floodplain Management Regulations
-  Building Footprint
-  Gateways
-  Trail-Street Crossings



1 inch = 500 feet

Map 8: Land Use Plan



*The Music Man Square*

contains the Principal Financial office building and parking lot. The parking lot parcel south of Southbridge Mall is the location of the proposed business-class hotel that will connect via skywalk to the Music Man Square Conference Center. Since most residential functions would not be viable barring major redevelopment, designating these sites as strictly commercial is appropriate.

#### Mixed Use:

The majority of the planning area is designated **Mixed Use** on the Land Use Plan. As noted above, the Zoning Ordinance allows and encourages mixing commercial, residential, and other forms and functions on the same property and even within the same building.

The forms and functions on the properties identified as mixed use tend to be mostly or all residential, or mostly or all commercial. This Plan promotes a mix of uses and encourages forms and functions that promote urban density and walkability. Adding a corner store or small service oriented businesses to residential neighborhoods allows for live-work arrangements and provides neighborhood services to residents of the area. Conversely, adding residential uses to primarily commercial areas provides new customers and encourages a greater variety of commercial functions beyond those that cater to the motoring public.

#### Residential:

Areas designated **Residential** are, with a few exceptions, established neighborhoods where intensive non-residential forms or functions would be inappropriate. The most notable exception is the property on the south side of Willow Creek opposite the Southbridge Mall parking area. Until recently, this area served as overflow parking for the Mall. As of this writing, a new 113-unit apartment building and 20 townhomes are under construction on this site. This property's proximity to mixed use and commercial areas justifies its exclusive residential designation. Other than this parcel, this Plan does not anticipate changes to the existing land use pattern.

#### Parking:

The Land Use Plan designates two areas as **Parking**. The block bounded by 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW, 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW, South Washington Avenue and South Adams Avenue provides parking for the Principal Financial office building and for the new Arena and repurposed Southbridge Mall. The area immediately south of Southbridge Mall will serve as the major parking lot for Southbridge, the Multi-Use Arena, and the new business-class hotel. Because of the established use of these properties and their contribution to major office and retail/service uses, the single-use Parking designation is appropriate for both properties.

#### Public:

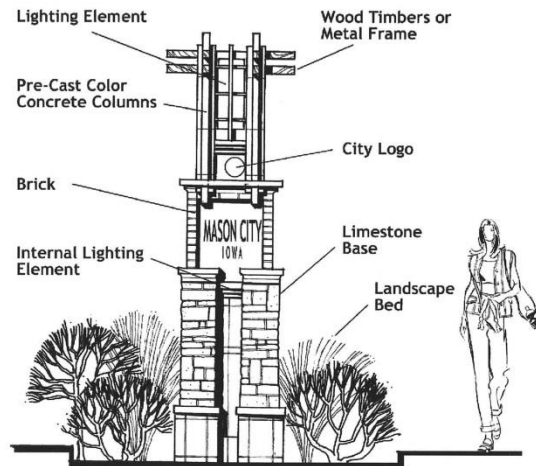
The **Public** land use designation identifies utility, civic and government forms and functions. The three areas designated as Public on the Land Use Plan are: the Mason City Fire Station, between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> streets SW and west of South Jefferson Avenue; the Alliant Energy substation at the northeast corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Street SE and South Delaware Avenue; and The Music Man Square and Mason City Community Theater, at the southeast corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE and South Delaware Avenue. The Music Man Square will continue to serve a public function when it is converted into a conference and convention center. The Plan does not anticipate any changes to these forms and functions.

## Gateways

The planning area serves as a primary entrance to Downtown Mason City. The Land Use Plan recommends four gateway locations for traffic entering the area.

At the west edge of the planning area, eastbound Highway 122 becomes a one-way street following 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW/SE. A triangle is formed by the divergence of the east- and west-bound streets. This triangle already contains a small marker commemorating Mason City as the hometown of composer Meredith Willson. A more substantial monument at this site would provide a more noticeable arrival to the area.

South Federal Avenue provides the main entrance to Downtown from the east, west, and south. The northeast corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Street SE and South Federal Avenue and the northwest corner of 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW and South Federal Avenue are prime locations for “secondary” gateways. The main purpose of these monuments would be to direct traffic to the Downtown area from highways 122 and 65 and create a sense of arrival into Downtown and the Willow Creek area.



Example secondary gateway (Source: 2004 Willow Creek Master Plan)

The triangular island formed by the convergence of southbound US 65 traffic with northbound US 65 traffic provides a prime opportunity for a “primary” gateway. This larger, more substantial monument would mark the major entrance to Downtown and would reflect the “River City” and Prairie Architecture theme, reflecting Mason City’s character and heritage. The gateway treatments proposed in the 2004 Willow Creek Master Plan and the 2007 Downtown Plan (below) are appropriate representations of the recommended gateways.

Since these thoroughfares are under control of the Department of Transportation, the City and IDOT will need to work together to ensure that safety goals are met while providing an enhanced gateway experience.

## Bike and Trail Routes

The Land Use Plan identifies both existing and planned bikeways and trails. Several bikeway routes proposed in Phase I of the “Activating Mason City” Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan are identified and cross through the planning area. Signs and pavement mark-



Example primary gateway (Source: 2007 Downtown Master Plan)





*Protected bridge example*

ings provide wayfinding for Route 4 through the western part of the planning area, which crosses Willow Creek at 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW before proceeding to the north along South Adams Avenue. Routes 1, 6, and 10 also pass in and out of the planning area. In addition, an extension of Route 3 is currently under construction as part of the IA Highway 122 improvements on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> streets SW/SE.

### **Trail-Street Crossings**

The Plan shows the route of the Willow Creek Trail through the planning area. The trail crosses the creek in two locations: at South Monroe Avenue just south of West State Street, and across the US 65 Northbound Bridge. The Plan identifies four street or bridge crossings where bicycle and pedestrian safety improvements are necessary.

The crossing at South Monroe Avenue (#1 on **Map 8**, see illustration on page 28) presents several challenges. The trail on the south side of the creek, where it transitions to South Monroe on the east side of the street, is narrow and not well defined. When the trail reaches South Monroe, it is not clear to pedestrians or cyclists where they should go next. The best route is to continue west from where the



*Example of a lighted pedestrian crosswalk (Howard Industries Prime Sign Program, <http://www.primesignprogram.com/ped-crossing-signage.php>)*

Trail meets South Monroe, cross the street to the west side and then cross the South Monroe Bridge. Directional signs and pavement markings are needed to guide trail users and alert motorists of the crosswalk.

In addition, the sidewalks on both sides of the bridge are narrow, and the bridge wall is low, especially relative to cyclists. On the west side, the bridge should be enhanced with a wider sidewalk, a low wall on the street side of the sidewalk to protect users from vehicles, and a metal barrier on the creek side to prevent accidental falls (see example above left).

The trail crosses under the South Washington Avenue Bridge (#2 on **Map 8** and page 28). During times of high water, this crossing is not accessible. With the addition of new development in this area on the south side of Willow Creek, the Plan recommends a new street crossing further south. This will allow pedestrians and cyclists better access to Downtown as well as to businesses in the southern part of the planning area.



The trail crossings at South Washington Avenue and Northbound US 65 (numbers 2 and 3 on **Map 8** and page 28) are mid-block crossings, which present safety challenges. To safely move pedestrians and cyclists across these streets, the Plan recommends enhanced crosswalks, with warning lights on each side of the street that are activated by pedestrians (see example, page 27). At night, the crosswalks themselves light up to warn motorists of people within the crosswalk.

Finally, the path across South Delaware Avenue needs to be better defined (number 4 on **Map 8** and page 28). Although this is also a mid-block crossing, the traffic volume at this location is much lower. The Plan recommends delineating the path with pavement markings and warning signs; additional lighting is not necessary.

This Plan also recommends improvements to the trail surface. Where the trail is susceptible to flooding (such as under the South Washington and South Pennsylvania bridges and at the east end of the trail), replacing the asphalt surface with concrete will preserve the trail for use in dry conditions. However, as noted under **Trail Extensions** below, if a new path is created on the south side of Willow Creek, abandoning the trail east of Delaware may be prudent.

The 2014 “Activating Mason City Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan” recommended moving the trail to the south side of Willow Creek between Northbound US 56 and Pennsylvania Avenue (see **Appendix C**). At Pennsylvania, the trail would connect to Bikeway Route 6, providing connections to the entire bikeway and trail system. This may be a better alternative than the current trail on the north side of the creek. The south side is the higher side at this location, so the trail would be better protected from flooding. The City already owns the land on the south side of Willow Creek between South Federal Avenue and South Delaware Avenue; the land between South Delaware and South Pennsylvania is owned by Interstate Power (Alliant Energy) and may be available for purchase or easement.

The north side trail and crossings could be maintained and would be usable during dry periods. However, the Iowa DOT may be unwilling to allow two mid-block crossings on Northbound US 65. If a new



*Lighted bridge example*

trail is built on the south side of the creek, the enhanced crossing (number 3 on **Map 8** and page 28) should also be relocated to the new trail crossing on the south side of the bridge.

### **Trail Extensions**

To extend the creekside experience for pedestrians and cyclists, the Land Use Plan shows a new trail on the north side of the creek. This reflects the recommendation of the 2004 Plan, which proposed an extensive trail system on both sides of the creek. Most of the land on the north side (the Southbridge parking lot and the land on the south side of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW) is City owned. If land on the north side of the creek between 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW and West State Street cannot be acquired, a trail on City land would still provide opportunities to link creekside parks with a trail.

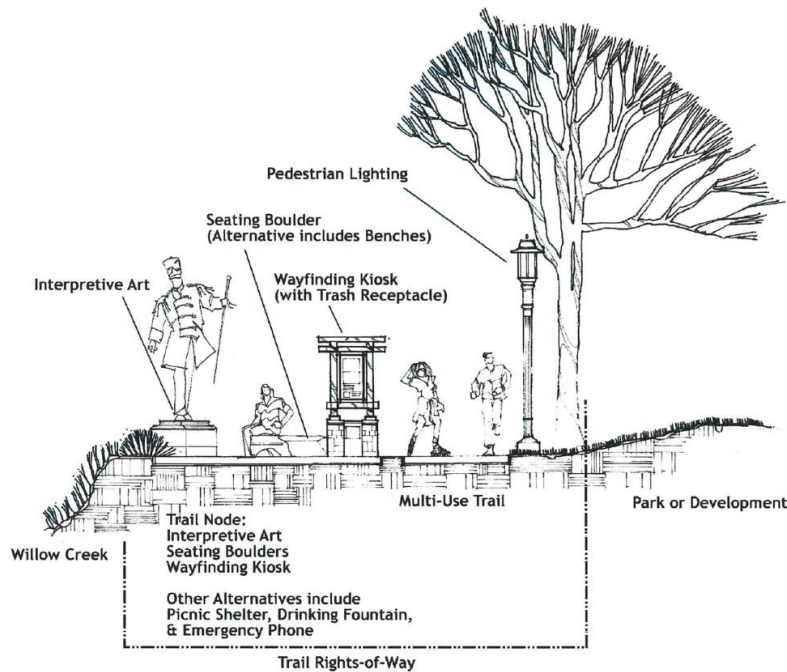
This extension includes a new pedestrian bridge from the City land to the existing trail and a trail at the southern edge of the Southbridge Mall parking lot; this bridge is a recommendation of the 2014 Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. These extensions provide pedestrian connections to the Mall, Multi-use Arena, the new apartment complex, and nearby neighborhoods. These extensions make

the area more walkable and will add vitality to the Downtown neighborhood.

### Creekside Character

As noted earlier, there is limited access and views to the actual creekfront along much of the corridor. This Plan recommends a careful thinning of brush and trees where views and access to the creekside are limited, particularly where the Willow Creek Trail is adjacent to the creek. However, enough vegetation should remain to maintain slopes and provide a natural filter for storm water.

This Plan recommends several “vertical” (above-ground) improvements to enhance the experience of walkers and cyclists on the Willow Creek Trail and motorists passing through the planning area.



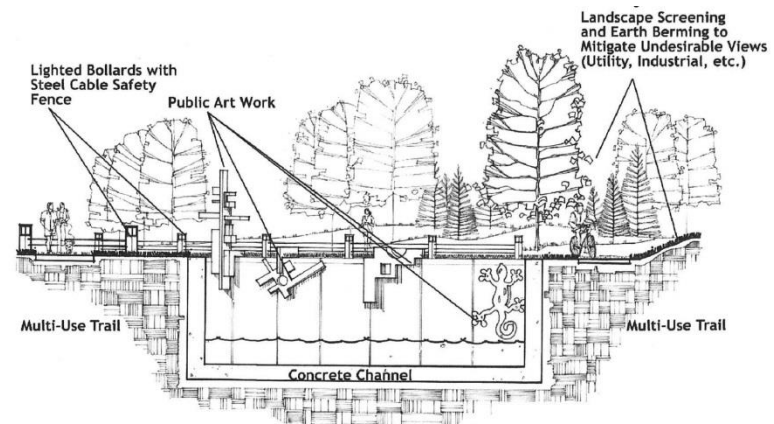
*The Willow Creek Trail should incorporate public art, interpretive features and basic trail amenities.*

Concept for trailside enhancements (Source: 2004 Willow Creek Master Plan)

The following improvements are a major component of the City’s Iowa Great Places initiative.

### Bridge Enhancements

Applying a creative lighting scheme to the two major bridges over the creek is one way to help residents and visitors to resonate with that brand. As shown in the example on Page 29, adding lights to the exterior and underside of the bridge both highlights the creek corridor and reflects the natural beauty of the area at night, when such features are generally not visible. This Plan recommends adding lighting to the South Washington Avenue and Northbound US 65 bridges, as well as to the pedestrian bridge linking the Southbridge Mall parking lot to the new apartment complex. Lights on the bridge decks, with a design that reflects the city’s character, are also proposed. These lights will encourage pedestrians to walk across and linger on the bridges, especially after dark.



*Public art display attached to concrete retaining wall.*

Concept for art along the creek walls (Source: 2004 Willow Creek Master Plan)

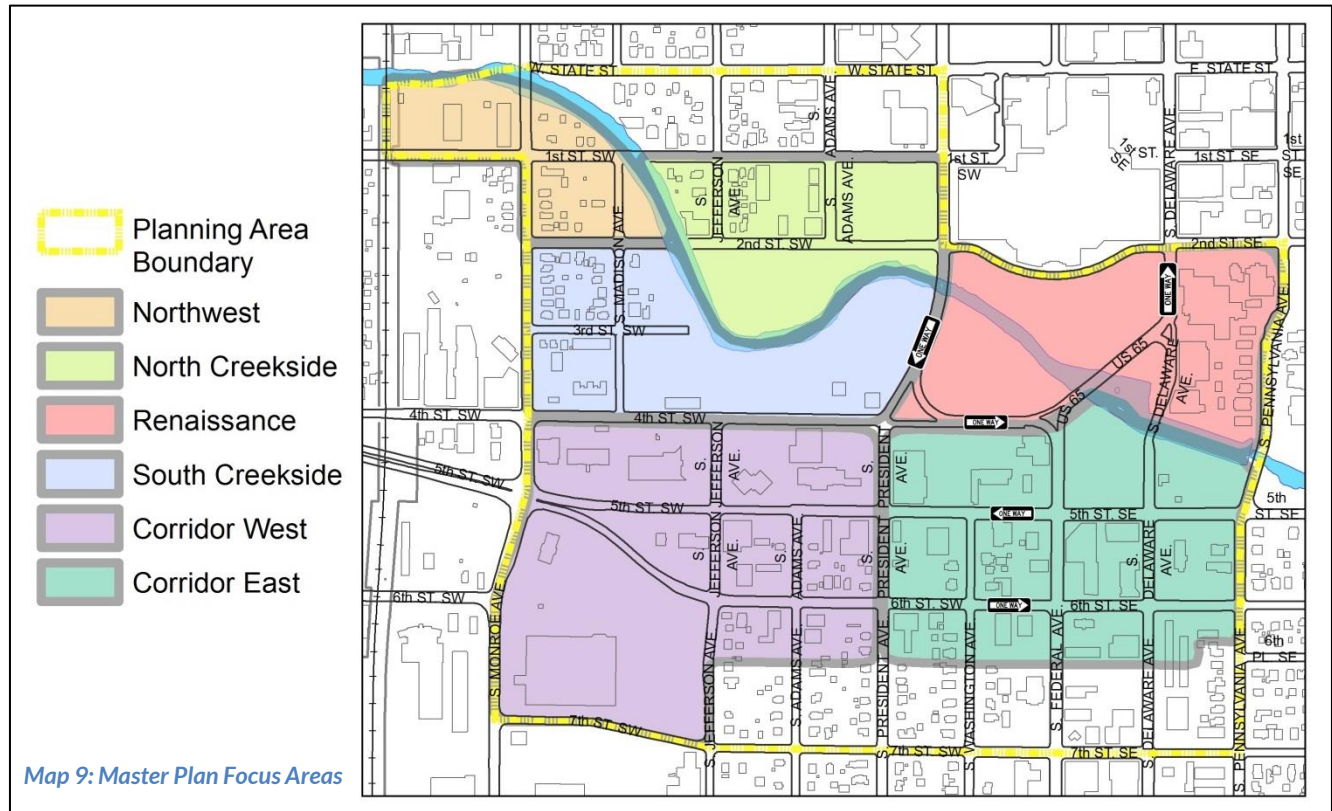
### Creekside Character Enhancements

The Iowa Great Places program encourages improvements that highlight unique characteristics that make a particular neighborhood a “great place.” Enhancements such as landscaping, lighting, and public art draw people to special public and private spaces and encourage them to interact, both with the space itself and with the other people gathered in it. The addition of character enhancements to the Willow Creek corridor will make it a special place to be with others in a unique and fun venue.

The 2004 Willow Creek Plan proposed several enhancements to the corridor to make the creekside a unique destination. These include adding public art, benches, and lighting along the trails. In addition, the large, featureless retaining walls, visible from the trails or from the bridges, could contain art pieces painted on or attached to the walls to provide visual interest. The examples on Page 30 are taken from that plan and remain viable ideas for enhancements along the creek corridor.

### Focus Areas: Introduction.

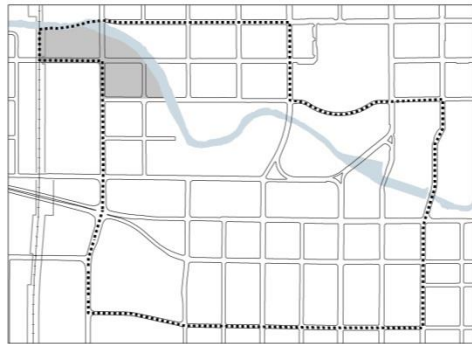
To allow a more detailed examination of future land use in specific areas, the planning area is divided into six focus areas (**Map 9**). The following analysis reviews existing land use, forms and functions, and transportation patterns in each focus area. A map of proposed enhancements and future land use recommendations follows for each area, with narrative describing the recommendations.



### Northwest

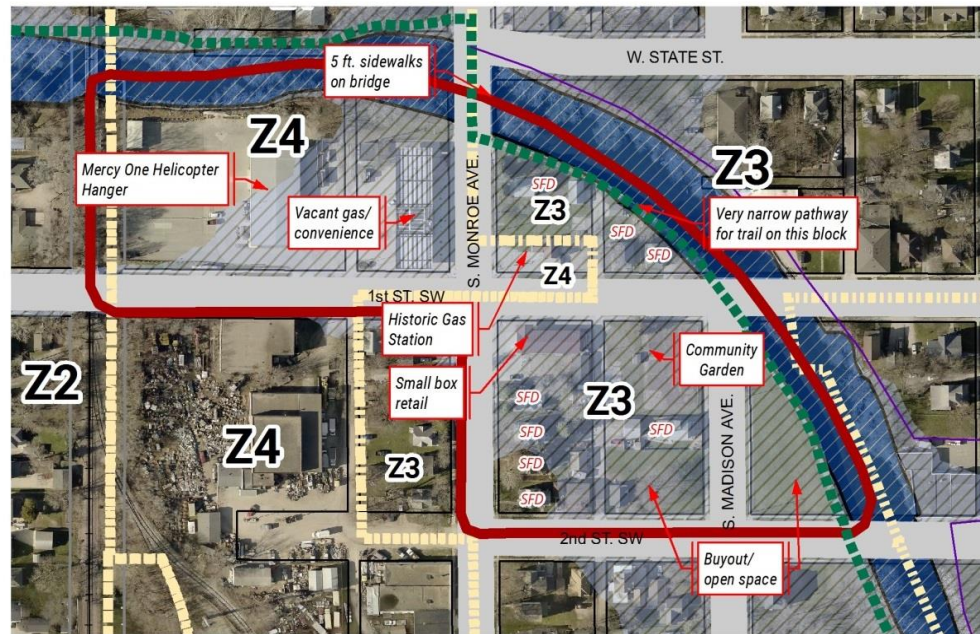
#### Existing Conditions

The majority of the land within the Northwest area is in the floodway fringe. This limits new construction and may impact redevelopment of existing structures. This area contains several elements that influence redevelopment and future land use.



## NORTHWEST

### NORTHWEST FOCUS AREA EXISTING CONDITIONS



- Floodway
- Floodway Fringe
- Northwest Focus Area
- Zoning Boundaries
- Willow Creek Trail

Map 10: Northwest Focus Area Existing Conditions

Much of the land between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> streets is City-owned flood buyout land. All of this land is deed restricted so that (with very few exceptions) no structures can be built. Except for one lot containing a single family home, the east half of the block bounded by 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW, South Madison Avenue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW and South Monroe Avenue is all City-owned; the northern portion of that block is a community garden.

The triangular block bounded by 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW, South Madison Avenue and Willow Creek once contained a dry cleaner, and the ground remains contaminated. This prevents any construction resulting in a major disturbance to the ground.

The former Wareco convenience store and gas station at the NW corner of 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW and South Monroe Avenue has been vacant for several years. The underground fuel tanks have been removed, and the site cannot be converted back to a gas station without significant modifications. This property was under several feet of water during the 2008 Flood.

The portion of the Willow Creek Trail between 1<sup>st</sup> Street Northwest and South Monroe Avenue is not paved and is only evident as a narrow dirt path. There is evidence of a 20-foot wide easement over the southerly part of this trail but no evidence of an easement for the northerly part. Detached garages serving the adjacent residences are very close to the existing pathway and present an obstruction to trail users. Pedestrians and cyclists report encounters with dogs and residents in the back yards of the residences.

The business at the northeast corner of 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW and South Monroe Avenue (currently a dog grooming business) was originally the White Eagle Gas Station. This Tudor style building is an outstanding example of early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial architecture and is well preserved.

As noted above, the sidewalks on the South Monroe Avenue bridge are not conducive to bicycle traffic. There are no barriers between the pedestrian way and the motorway,

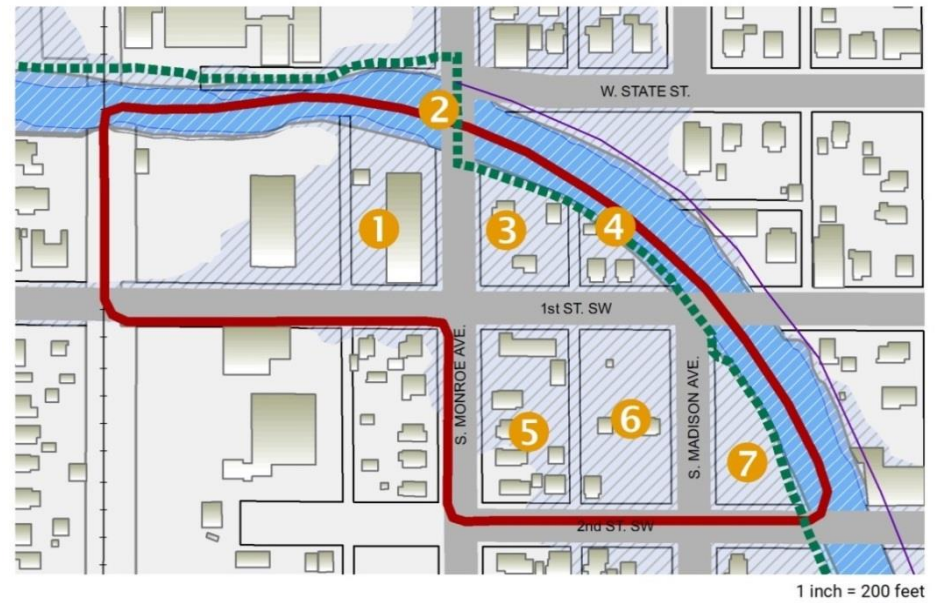


and the side walls are too low to prevent potential falls off a bicycle and into the creek.

**Plan Recommendations**

- 1 The small size of the former convenience store and the large canopy surrounding it inhibit adaptive reuse of the existing building. Demolition and filling the property may be the best opportunity for development. Since all of the lot is in the Floodway Fringe, fill is limited to 4,600 square feet. The property is best suited for a small retail or office function. Floodplain management restrictions inhibit any residential functions.
- 2 See the recommendations for trail crossings at the South Monroe Avenue Bridge on pages 27 and 28.
- 3 Promote functions that preserve the historic White Eagle Gas Station building.
- 4 Widen and pave the trail between 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW and South Monroe Avenue. This may require acquisition of the accessory structures near the trail. Ideally, the City should acquire the three adjacent properties and demolish all of the buildings, to avoid conflicts between trail users and adjacent residents.
- 5 Dilapidated existing structures in the floodway fringe should be demolished as opportunities allow. Vital structures should be maintained and flood-proofed to the extent possible.
- 6 If the remaining non-buyout lot on the east half of this block becomes available, consider purchasing it to expand the Community Garden to the south.
- 7 Soils on this property are contaminated due to the pre-existing dry cleaning plant. Where possible, add bollard lighting to the existing trail.

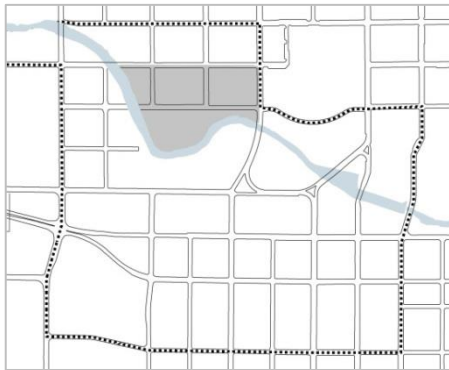
**NORTHWEST FOCUS AREA RECOMMENDATIONS**



Map 11: Northwest Area Plan Recommendations



Historic White Eagle Gas Station



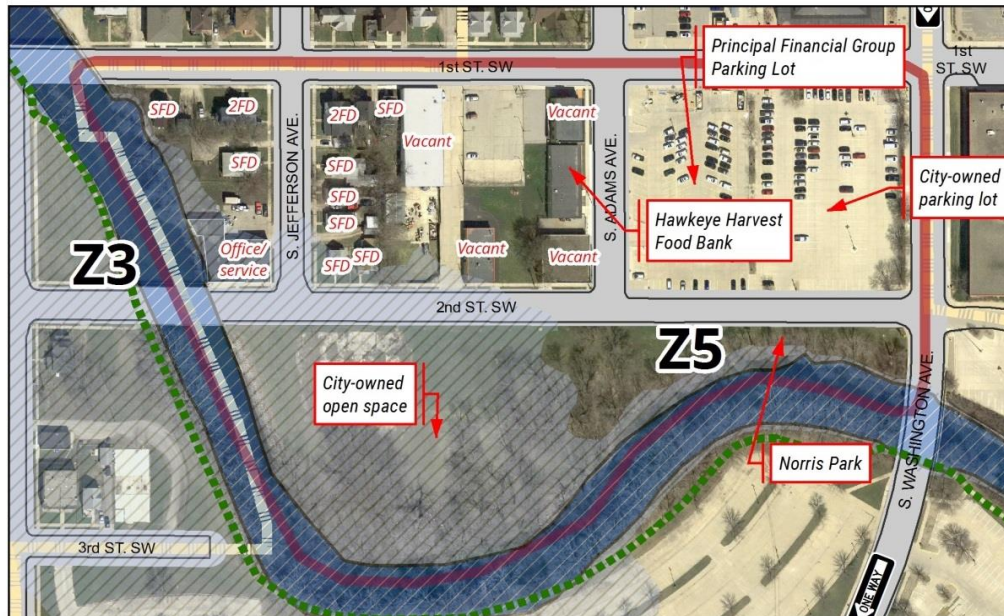
## NORTH CREEKSIDE

### North Creekside

#### Existing Conditions

The North Creekside Focus Area is dominated by two land uses. All of the area south of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street NW and north of Willow Creek is City-owned open space, with the eastern portion designated as Norris Park. The City acquired the remainder of the land prior to the 2008 Flood. There is evidence that portions of that area contain contaminated soils resulting from the uses existing prior to the flood.

## NORTH CREEKSIDE FOCUS AREA EXISTING CONDITIONS



- Floodway
- Floodway Fringe
- North Creekside Focus Area
- Zoning Boundaries
- Willow Creek Trail

Map 12: North Creekside Area Existing Conditions

The block bounded by South Adams Avenue, South Washington Avenue, 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW is a surface parking lot. The City owns the east half of this block, which is dedicated to public parking. When Southbridge Mall opened in 1985, mall patrons accessing the former J. C. Penney store at the west end of the Mall used this lot extensively. The west half of the block belongs to the owner of the Principal Financial Group building and is dedicated to Principal employees. These employees also park in the City-owned lot, as there is no longer access to the west doors of the former Penney's space. This may change after the Multi-Purpose Arena opens in late 2019.

The other blocks in the North Creekside area are a mix of single family and duplex homes and small commercial buildings. While the commercial buildings are generally in serviceable condition, the residential buildings are mostly dilapidated or show signs of wear and disinvestment. Most of them are renter-occupied.

#### Plan Recommendations

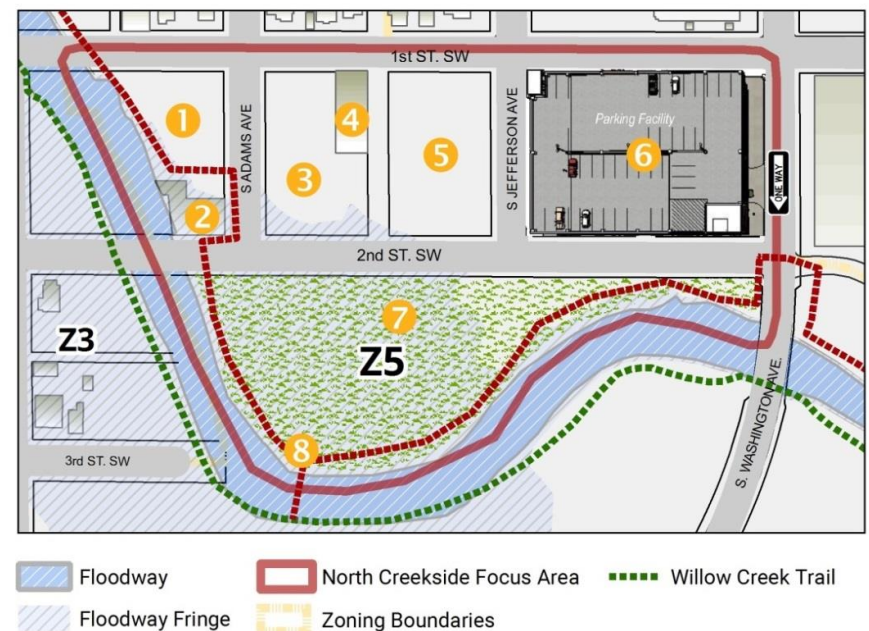
The proximity of this area to Downtown Mason City, open space along Willow Creek, and the new Multi-Purpose Arena make it a prime candidate for redevelopment. This Plan recommends the following:



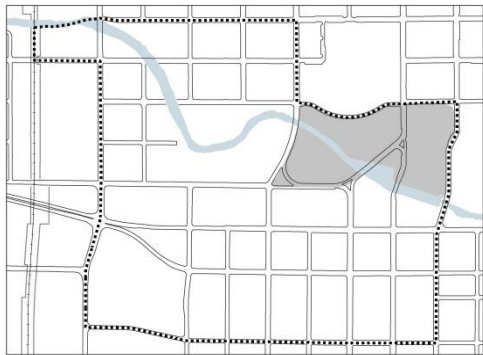
- 1 Assuming assemblage of lots, redevelop the north half of this block by demolishing existing buildings and creating both competitive-rate and affordable housing. Multi-family apartments and townhomes would take advantage of creek views.
- 2 Ideal redevelopment of the office/service building, built right above the creek on its west side, would be a restaurant or other neighborhood business taking advantage of the creekside location, provided floodplain management regulations are met.
- 3 The existing houses on this block are generally in poor condition. Assemblage of lots, demolition and redevelopment with multiple family dwellings or affordable zero lot-line houses would be appropriate across the street from the creekside park.
- 4 The existing building with a high-arched roof and an open floor area lends itself to an assembly use, such as a dance hall or a small place of worship.
- 5 The owner of the Principal Financial building has expressed a need to maintain surface parking for employees within the Principal Financial building. With the potential loss of parking at the current site due to a proposed parking structure, the east half of this block could meet this parking need.
- 6 The ultimate parking impact of the new Multi-Use Arena, the proposed Downtown Hotel and Performing Arts Pavilion, and a repurposed Southbridge Mall is unknown. The block west of the Mall is the best location for a parking structure, should one be needed. This facility would provide parking for downtown employees and shoppers during the day and Arena/Pavilion and nightlife patrons in the evening. The structure could also provide leased spaces to residents of downtown buildings. Improvements to pedestrian crosswalks across South Washington Avenue at both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> streets would be needed so that parkers can safely cross the highway.

- 7 The large open space along the creek provides a premier opportunity for active and passive recreation. The presence of the Floodway Fringe as well as likely contamination limits or prevents major structures. Maintaining a large, open field allows informal use, such as pickup soccer games and Frisbee throwing. Alternatively, this location may lend itself to a “pump track” for mountain biking.
- 8 A new trail on the north side of the creek connects the new park with Downtown. A new bridge (recommended in the 2014 Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan) connects the trails on both sides of the creek to each other and to the wider bikeway and trail network. The trail would pass around the office/service building along its east side.

## NORTH CREEKSIDE FOCUS AREA PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS



Map 13 North Creekside Area Recommendations



# RENAISSANCE

## Renaissance

### Existing Conditions

The Renaissance Focus Area contains three of the five “River City Renaissance” projects, partially financed through the Iowa Reinvestment District program. The former Mall overflow parking lot, south of Willow Creek, is currently under development as “The River” apartments and townhomes. This project will provide 113 apartments in a four-story building, and 20 townhome units near the creek. Expected completion is in late 2020.

## RENAISSANCE FOCUS AREA EXISTING CONDITIONS



- Floodway
- Floodway Fringe
- Renaissance Focus Area
- Zoning Boundaries
- Willow Creek Trail

Willow Creek follows a concrete channel through this area. The surrounding streets and parking lots drain directly to the creek through storm sewers.

A 535-space parking lot serves Southbridge Mall on the south side of the Mall (as well as other lots to the west and northeast). The eastern third of the lot is planned for the River City Renaissance Downtown Hotel. The impact of this loss of parking and the post-development parking needs of the Hotel, Multi-Purpose Arena, and repurposed Mall is yet to be seen.

This area contains two small, underutilized parks: West Interstate and East Interstate, so named as they are on land once owned by the Interstate Power Company. Both parks provide a respite from urban surroundings, but their relative isolation provides challenges for maintenance and safety.

The row of commercial buildings on South Delaware Avenue, south of Music Man Square, is a combination of two-story mixed use buildings and one-story commercial buildings. The upper floors of the mixed use buildings contain apartments. The middle building of the two-story row is the Willson Bakery, which was owned and run by the parents of Meredith Willson, who grew up in the nearby house on South Pennsylv-

Map 14: Renaissance Area Existing Conditions



nia Avenue. There are no current plans to preserve this building in a historical context.

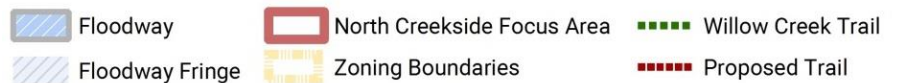
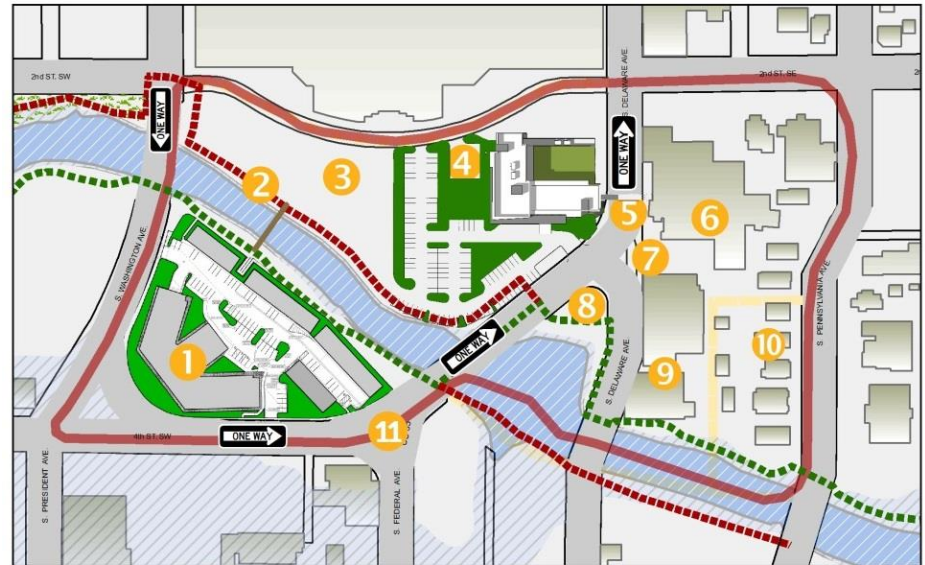
In addition to the Willson Boyhood Home, the residences along South Pennsylvania Avenue are a mix of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century styles and mid-century multi-family dwellings. This neighborhood is unique with regard to the quality of the architecture and the context it provides for the nearby cultural attractions.

**Plan Recommendations**

This Plan recognizes the goals of Mason City’s Iowa Reinvestment District program, “River City Renaissance.” In addition to the arena and performing arts pavilion located in Southbridge Mall, the Plan anticipates construction of the Reinvestment District projects beginning in 2020, with completion planned for the end of 2021. This Plan recommends the following for the Renaissance focus area:

- 1 Apartment development under construction, “The River.”
- 2 New trail extension on the north side of Willow Creek. This could take the form of a cycle track with delineated bicycle lanes to distinguish bikeways from parking lot aisles.
- 3 Maintain and improve the parking lot serving the Mall, Arena, and Hotel/Conference Center.
- 4 New Downtown Hotel (proposed to be a Hyatt Place Hotel). A large ballroom in the Hotel will accommodate groups of up to 650 guests.
- 5 Proposed skywalk over South Delaware Avenue, connecting the Downtown Hotel to The Music Man Square.
- 6 The River City Renaissance program includes renovating the existing Music Man Square and Meredith Willson Museum into a conference and meeting space. The museum will be upgraded with new, interactive exhibits and artifacts from the Willson collection.

**RENAISSANCE FOCUS AREA  
PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS**



Map 15: Renaissance Area Plan Recommendations

- 7 Reconfigure the intersection of South Delaware Avenue and Northbound US 65. Eliminate the through lane to NB 65 and steer traffic towards the new entrance to the Downtown Hotel.
- 8 Open West Interstate Park by eliminating excess trees and brush at the top of the slope. Construct a switchback trail down the slope to allow for accessible entry to the lower park area, thereby creating a sense of safety and activity in the park.
- 9 Seek funding to restore the facades of the mixed use and commercial buildings along South Delaware Avenue. Explore a reuse of

the former Willson Bakery that highlights the Willson family history in the building.

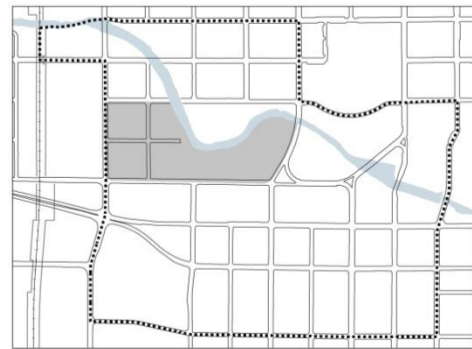
- 10 Preserve and maintain the row of historic residential structures on South Pennsylvania Avenue, to maintain a transition between Downtown and the neighborhoods beyond.
- 11 Proposed primary gateway feature, as described earlier in this chapter.

## South Creekside

### Existing Conditions

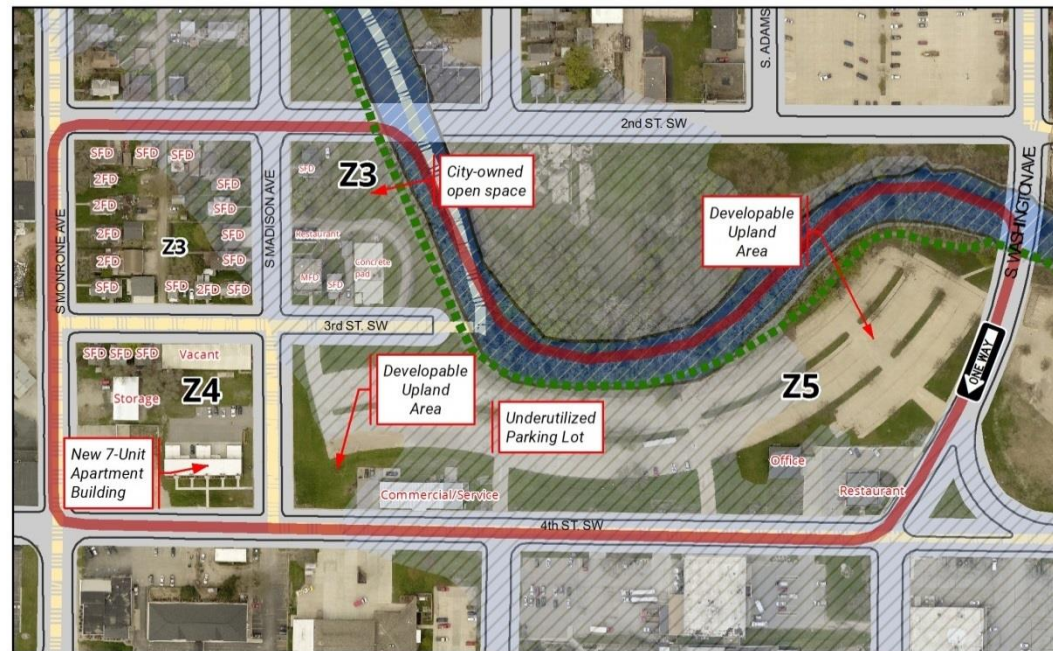
The most dominant feature in this subarea is the nearly empty parking lot that takes up much of the area on the south side of Willow Creek. This lot was built to serve the Principal Financial Group office building, across the creek and two blocks to the north (including a planned second building that was never built). This parking lot is nearly empty all of the time. Current employees of Principal do not need to use it, as there is adequate parking closer to the building. About two-thirds of this property is in the Floodway Fringe, but the most visible (and valuable) part, near South Washington Avenue, is upland.

The block bounded by South Madison Avenue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW, 3<sup>rd</sup> Street SW, and Willow Creek is a mix of single and multi-family dwellings, a restaurant, and City flood buyout land. A large concrete slab is left behind from a building that was demolished after the 2008 Flood. On South Madison Avenue, a small BBQ restaurant, at this location for many years, survived the flood and is a neighborhood icon.



## SOUTH CREEKSIDE

## SOUTH CREEKSIDE FOCUS AREA EXISTING CONDITIONS



- Floodway
- South Creekside Focus Area
- Willow Creek Trail
- Floodway Fringe
- Zoning Boundaries

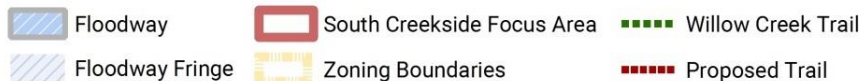
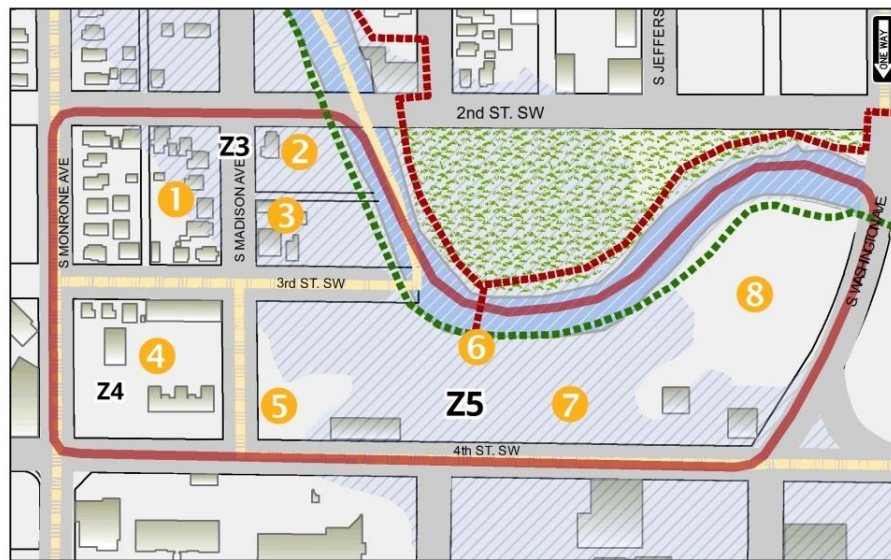
Map 16 South Creekside Area Existing Conditions

The block in the northwestern corner of this focus area contains mostly rental houses, in various stages of quality and repair. The eastern half of this block is within the Floodway Fringe.

State flood recovery funds financed a new 7-unit apartment building at the southeast corner of South Madison Avenue and 4<sup>th</sup> Street SW. This block also contains an old tire store and a newer storage building, along with some single family rental houses. The southwest corner, which used to contain a fuel station, is vacant and ready for redevelopment.

**Plan Recommendations**

**SOUTH CREEKSIDE FOCUS AREA  
PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS**



Map 17 South Creekside Area Plan Recommendations

**1** Dilapidated structures within the Floodway Fringe should be demolished as opportunities allow. Maintain and flood-proof vital structures to the extent possible. If enough parcels are assembled, consider redevelopment with multi-family and townhome residential units that conform to the floodplain management regulations.

**2** The areas along Willow Creek consist of flood buyout properties. Enhance the Willow Creek Trail with lighting and other trail amenities that conform to buyout and flood management restrictions.

**3** Highlight the neighborhood BBQ restaurant on private (non-buyout) property by adding an outdoor seating area. Provide connections to the Willow Creek Trail to attract cyclists and pedestrians to the restaurant. Convert the existing concrete pad to a trail-head parking area.

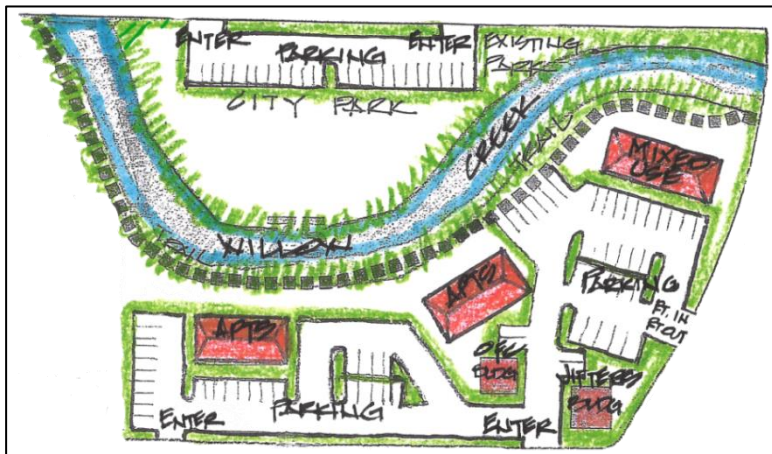
**4** Encourage further development of this block with new apartments and residential developments, similar to the new building at the southeast corner of the block.

**5** The northeast corner of South Madison Avenue and 4<sup>th</sup> Street SW is not in the Floodway Fringe. This site is appropriate for any development allowed in the Z5, Central Business zoning district. Mixed use development, with commercial uses on the first floor and residential uses on the upper floors, is ideal.

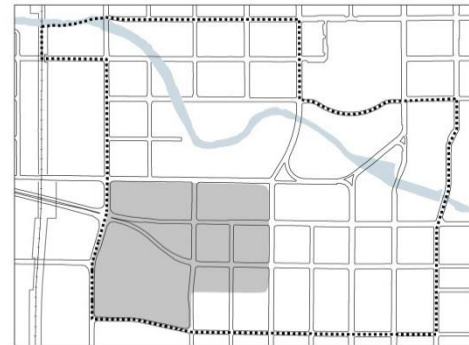
**6** Improve the trail by clearing the brush along the creek. Add lighting and provide pedestrian amenities: benches, sculpture, etc. A new pedestrian bridge connects the trail to a proposed trail on the north side of the creek, and provides access to the park land/open space.

7 The area within the Floodway Fringe at this location consists of approximately 4.5 acres; of this, 39,255 square feet may be filled to elevate the property. This area could accommodate a residential or mixed use development. Residential uses require a larger “freeboard” area above the base flood elevation; therefore, taller buildings with a smaller land-coverage footprint would have less impact on the Floodway Fringe and allow for a more desirable density.

8 Because of its proximity to busy South Washington Avenue/US 65 Southbound, this location is a prime spot for a signature mixed use development. Its creekside and trailside location makes it a desirable for an assembly use such as a restaurant or nightclub, with connections to the trail to attract cyclists and pedestrians. Apartments above also provide a built-in market for area businesses and would contribute to a sense of vitality and safety near the downtown area. The illustration below shows how development on this site can meet these goals.

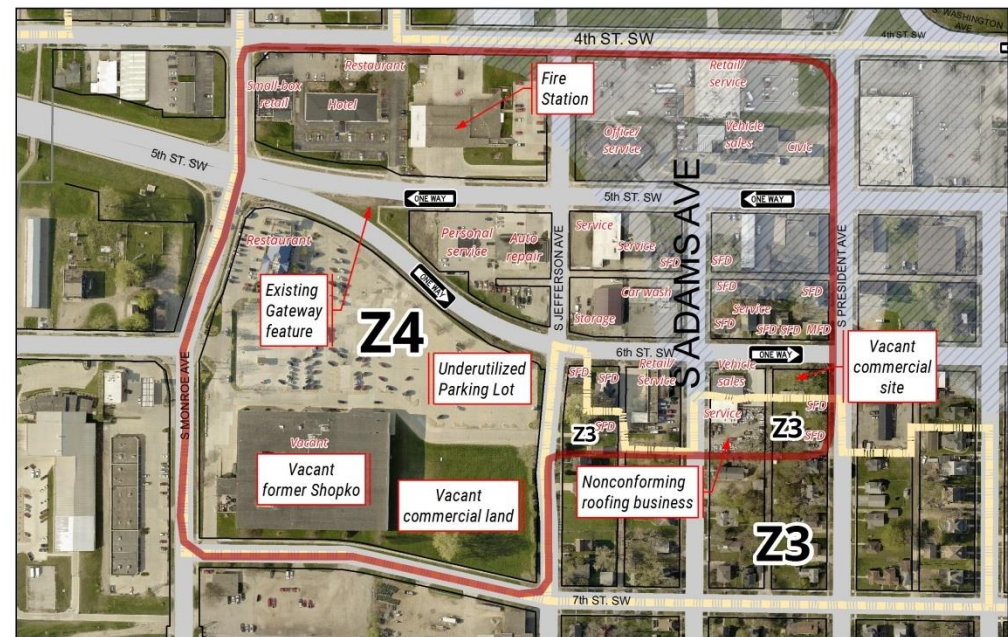


South Creekside Development Concept



## CORRIDOR WEST WEST

### CORRIDOR WEST FOCUS AREA EXISTING CONDITIONS



Floodway Fringe Corridor West Focus Area Zoning Boundaries

Map 18 Corridor West Area Existing Conditions

## Corridor West

### Existing Conditions

The Corridor West focus area is the western gateway to the planning area. Most traffic enters the area from IA Highway 121, from the west on 4<sup>th</sup> Street SW, and from the east on 5<sup>th</sup> Street SW. As one of the older corridors through the city, this area has a major impact on the city’s impression on first-time visitors and those passing through. The IA 122 Corridor also provides a major access to Downtown Mason City, so it serves as Downtown’s “front door.”

The split of IA 122 into the one-way pair of 5<sup>th</sup> Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Street provides a location for an entry feature where the two streets diverge. An existing monument celebrating Mason City as the birthplace of Meredith Willson is somewhat small and difficult to notice.

A defining feature of this focus area is the vacant “big-box” on 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW and South Monroe Avenue, which contained a Shopko discount store. Reuse and redevelopment of vacant big-box stores has been a challenge for many communities.

While the westbound section of IA 122 (5<sup>th</sup> Street SW) is mostly commercial, eastbound 122 (6<sup>th</sup> Street SW) is a mix of commercial and residential forms and functions. This presents a challenge when incompatible uses are adjacent to one another. The narrow width and shallow depth of the lots along the corridor inhibit redevelopment unless a developer is able to assemble several lots. The south side of 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW within the planning area is a mix of Z3 General Urban and Z4 Multi-Use zoning. To convert residential forms and functions to commercial, a developer would likely have to assemble several properties and then rezone some of the lots from Z3 to Z4. Accommodating this new commercial would need to consider the transition to the established residential land use pattern to the south.

At the time this Plan was drafted, the Iowa Department of Transportation was finishing reconstruction of IA Highway 122 between South Monroe Avenue and South Carolina Avenue. This includes complete reconstruction of the pavement section, with new curb,

upgraded sidewalk, and access improvements. The pavement width is narrower than before, but there is adequate right-of-way to allow for 5-foot bicycle lanes on both streets.

### Plan Recommendations

- 1 As recommended earlier in this chapter, a more substantial and visible gateway treatment is appropriate at this location.
- 2 The parking lot serving the vacant big-box store is much larger than needed for most future uses of this property. Consider creating outlots along the 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW frontage, with developments that generate a higher level of tax revenue.

## CORRIDOR WEST FOCUS AREA PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS



Map 19: Corridor West Area Plan Recommendations

3 As stated, redeveloping vacant big-box stores is a challenge. However, the City has seen successful reuse of similar buildings in other areas of the community. Possible reuse could be dividing the building into smaller stores, or conversion to a function that needs large open areas and high ceilings, such as an indoor recreation “fun park.”

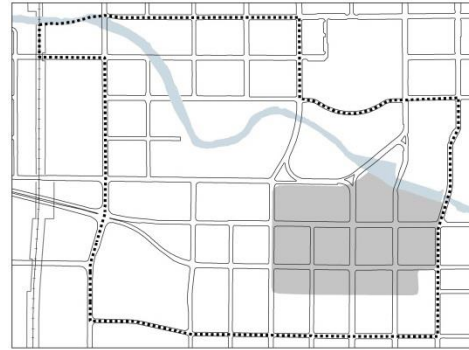
4 Development of the land east of the vacant big box should complement the reuse of the big-box store. For instance, sand volleyball courts or batting cages would go well with an indoor recreation center.

5 The roofing business on South Adams Avenue is a non-conforming use in the Z3, General Urban zoning district. Consider rezoning to Z4 to remove the nonconforming status. Any redevelopment of this site will require greater setbacks and buffers from the existing residential area to the south to conform to the Zoning Ordinance.

6 With completion of the IA 122 highway project, Bikeway Route 3 extends along 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> streets. To the extent practical, target future commercial development towards the cycling public while retaining the historic “road into town” character of the corridor.

7 As a major arterial, it is important to improve and maintain a positive aesthetic impact along this corridor. Focus resources from City, State, Federal, and private sources to encourage façade improvements, landscaping, new signs, and other character enhancements along the corridor.

8 The existing development within the Floodway Fringe is appropriate and should be maintained; introduce flood-proofing measures as necessary.



## CORRIDOR EAST

### CORRIDOR EAST FOCUS AREA EXISTING CONDITIONS



Map 20: Corridor East Area Existing Conditions



## Corridor East

### Existing Conditions

This focus area is the eastern extension of the IA 122 corridor through the planning area. As such, many of the characteristics identified in the Corridor West Focus Area also apply to the Corridor East area. These include the improvements to IA 122, the mix of commercial and residential forms and functions along the 122 corridor, the introduction of new bikeways, and the aesthetic impact of the corridor.

This area is the primary southern entrance to Downtown Mason City. As such, it has an impact on first impressions as visitors enter the planning area and Downtown. As the River City Renaissance projects are completed, this focus area will direct an even greater volume of traffic to the Downtown area.

Much of the focus area is within the Floodway Fringe. As noted above, this impacts development of new structures as well as redevelopment of existing structures. An example is the rehabilitation of the former TravelLodge motel, currently underway at the time of drafting this Plan. Flood resistant flooring and wall treatments on the first floor rooms and elevation of mechanical units above the base flood elevations are among the measures necessary to redevelop this building.

The block bounded by South Federal Avenue, South Delaware Avenue, 5<sup>th</sup> Street NE and Willow Creek is a prime entrance into downtown. The northwest portion and a smaller area at the southeast corner of this block are in upland and are not subject to the floodplain management regulations.

The block immediately to the east contains an Alliant Energy substation. As already stated, most of this block is vacant. Reuse of this property is limited by potential contamination from the power plant that was located here many years ago.

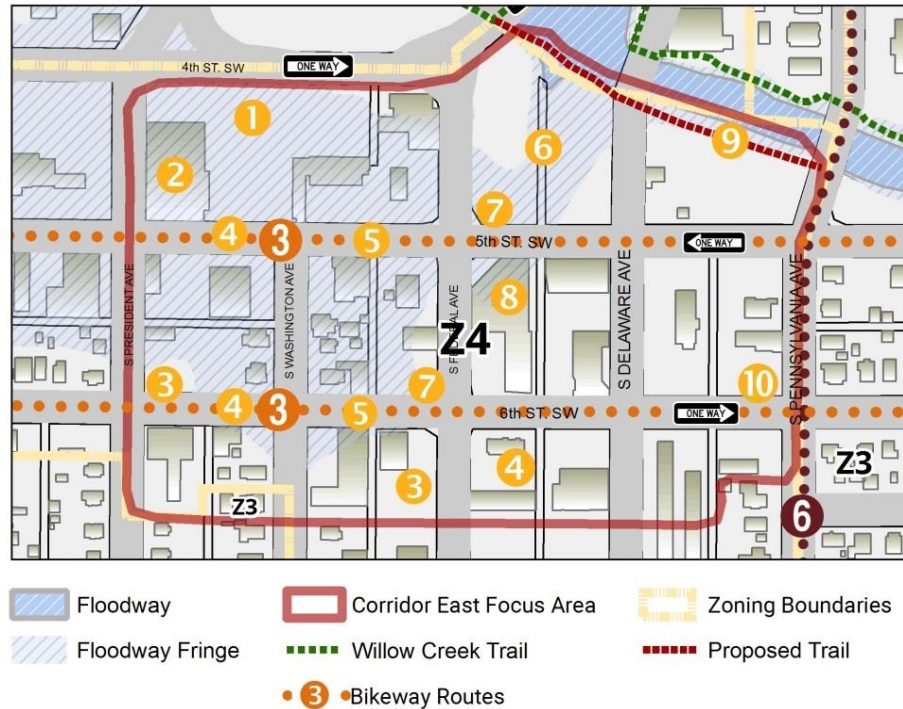
This focus area contains several underutilized properties. The vacant former grocery warehouse at the northwest corner of South Federal Avenue and 5<sup>th</sup> Street SE affords a prime opportunity for a

signature development at the entrance to Downtown. The retail center on the southeast corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Street NW and South President Avenue is within the Floodway Fringe and has several vacancies. The impact of the 2008 Flood on the small businesses that operated in this center was severe and most did not reopen. The parking lot serving this center is much larger than necessary and is mostly empty of vehicles.

### Plan Recommendations

- 1 Develop a portion of the underutilized parking lot with a retail or entertainment use that can draw from the apartments under construction across the street and other nearby areas. This will require the use of fill to meet floodplain management requirements, which may restrict or prevent any type of residential use.
- 2 Take measures to protect the retail center from flooding, particularly the spaces serving smaller tenants.
- 3 The vacant lot at the southwest corner of South President Avenue and 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW and the open space on South Federal Avenue south of the small personal service/retail center at the northeast corner of South Federal and 6<sup>th</sup> Street SW afford development of small, mixed use (commercial/residential) or “live-work” units.
- 4 With completion of the IA 122 highway project, Bikeway Route 3 extends along 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> streets. To the extent practical, target future commercial development towards the cycling public while retaining the historic “road into town” character of the corridor.
- 5 As a major arterial, it is important to improve and maintain a positive aesthetic impact along this corridor. Focus resources from City, State, Federal, and private sources to encourage façade improvements, landscaping, new signs and other character enhancements along the corridor.

## CORRIDOR EAST FOCUS AREA PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS



Map 21: Corridor East Area Plan Recommendations

**6** The upland portions of this block provide prime opportunities for signature “gateway” developments into Downtown. The larger upland area at the northwest quadrant is appropriate for a hotel, preferably one with a service level different from the hotel developed as part of the River City Renaissance project; this allows a variety of choices and room costs for downtown visitors and conference attendees. Provide access to Willow Creek with a trail and adjacent amenities.

The graphic illustrates a development concept for the upland portions of this block, with the remainder as parking and open space. This concept also allows for a secondary gateway treatment.

**7** These corners are appropriate for secondary gateways, as described earlier in this chapter.

**8** The former warehouse at the northwest corner of South Federal Avenue and 6<sup>th</sup> Street SE, with its unique footprint and large interior spaces, is an excellent candidate for mixed use redevelopment.

The facility contains about 12 on-site parking spaces that could serve residents, while commercial patrons could park in the City parking lot across the street on South Federal.

**9** The open space on this block is underutilized. Extend the Willow Creek trail on the south side of the creek to connect with Bikeway Route 6 on South Pennsylvania Avenue. Barriers to keep people away from the electric substation will be needed.

**10** The rental business on both sides of 6<sup>th</sup> Street SE uses the front parking areas to store items available for rent, such as backhoes, scissor lifts, etc. This affects the aesthetics of the corridor. Work with the owner to install landscaping to mitigate this impact.



Development concept, S. Federal/S. Delaware/6th Street SE

## CHAPTER 4 IMPLEMENTATION

This chapter outlines a framework for implementing the recommendations from the previous chapter. Each project, policy, or strategy is assigned a priority level and a timeline. A guide to acronyms is located at the end of the table (Page 49).

### Implementation Framework

#### Priority Levels

1. Actions that have a significant and discernible impact, or actions that advance the goals and objectives of the Plan in a substantial and meaningful way. These actions are often under the purview and control of the City.
2. Actions that have a discernible impact, as well as actions that help bring Level 1 projects to fruition. In some cases, the City may only play an advisory or encouragement role in these actions.
3. Actions that advance the goals and objectives of this Plan, which contribute to improving the planning area but have a lesser impact.

These actions generally are pursued only if resources are available after higher priority actions are completed..

#### Time Frames

**A. Immediate.** Actions that should commence within one to two years after adoption of this Plan. These will generally be Priority Level 1 or 2 projects.

Some Immediate timeframe projects, policies, and strategies may, due to complexity or other factors, take more than one or two years to complete. However, such actions are generally important enough to commence as soon as practicable.

**B. Mid-Term.** Actions that should commence within five years after adoption of this Plan; generally Priority Level 2 or 3 projects.

**C. Long Term.** Actions that can be deferred for longer periods. These will usually be Priority Level 3 projects.

### Implementation Plan

PROJECT/POLICY/STRATEGY	PRIORITY	FUNDING/PARTNERS	COMMENTS	TIMEFRAME
Work with Iowa DOT to design and build lighted trail and pedestrian crossings at South Washington Ave. and NB US 65	1	CIP; STP IDOT	Safe crossings are required to promote wide use of the trail system	Immediate
Review the Iowa Great Places Plan and revise to include projects recommended in the Willow Creek Master Plan	1	N/A IEDA;MSMC;MCCC	Ensure that this funding stream is available to meet the goals of the Willow Creek Plan	Immediate
Fund, design and build primary gateway feature	1	IGP; TE IDOT	Construct primary gateway at S. Federal/4 <sup>th</sup> St. SW	Immediate
Provide lighting along the trails to ensure safe use at all hours	1	CIP; CAT IDNR	Provide both overhead and bollard lighting where needed	Immediate

PROJECT/POLICY/STRATEGY	PRIORITY	FUNDING/PARTNERS	COMMENTS	TIMEFRAME
Acquire needed land, widen and improve the trail between 1 <sup>st</sup> St. SW and S. Monroe Ave.	1	TIF; CAT IDNR	May require removal of existing single family homes and/or outbuildings	Immediate
Provide assistance and gap funding to develop vacant or under-developed land in the Floodway Fringe, in accordance with floodplain management requirements	1	TIF; URTA	Develop and fund new and existing programs to assist with aesthetic improvements or to meet floodplain requirements	Immediate
Reconfigure the intersection of S. Delaware Ave. and NB US 65 to provide direct access to the Downtown Hotel parking area	1	TIF; STP IDOT	Work with DOT to design and construct a safer intersection at this location	Immediate
Clear excess trees and brush from the creek corridor to open vistas and provide access to the water	1	City personnel; volunteers; TIF	Trail and creek front can be maintained by the "Friends of Willow Creek" (see below)	Immediate
Work with property owners along the IA 122 and US 65 corridors to improve the aesthetic impact of the area	1	City personnel	Focus nuisance abatement and code enforcement efforts to provide a positive impression for visitors and residents.	Immediate
Create an independent "Friends of Willow Creek" organization, to provide volunteers for creek corridor upkeep, and to advocate for programs, funding and activities to keep the creek area clean, active, and vibrant	2	Private foundations, volunteer/in-kind donations	While technically independent from the City, this organization should work closely with the City Active Living and Transportation Commission on shared goals and programs.	Immediate
Seek partnerships with local organizations with a stake in the future of Willow Creek	2	MCCC; MSMC; schools and community college	Work with Main Street Mason City, Chamber of Commerce, etc. Co-sponsor programs with NIACC and area schools	Mid-Term
Plan and program public events in the parks and on public land, to highlight the creek and encourage public use of the corridor	2	MCCC; MSMC	Raise awareness of Norris Park, East and West Interstate parks and other public lands along the corridor	Mid-Term
Acquire land for open space and trail expansion	2	TIF; CAT IDNR	Focus on former Interstate Power property on south side of Willow Creek, between S. Delaware and S. Pennsylvania	Mid-Term

PROJECT/POLICY/STRATEGY	PRIORITY	FUNDING/PARTNERS	COMMENTS	TIMEFRAME
Fund, design and build secondary gateway features	2	IGP; TE IDOT; IDNR Private donations and in-kind labor	Located at west end of planning area at S. Monroe Ave., 5 <sup>th</sup> St. SW at S. Federal Ave., and 6 <sup>th</sup> St. SW and S. Federal	Mid-Term
Work with River City Sculptures on Parade and other civic organizations to provide public art along the trails, on creek bed walls, and along the corridors	2	Private Funding River City Sculptures on Parade (MCCC);		Mid-Term
Provide cyclist and pedestrian amenities along the trails, including benches, wayfinding, and creekside overlooks	2	CIP; CAT; TE; LOST IDOT; IDNR	Ensure that new development along the trail is directly accessible; focus on businesses that cater to cycling and pedestrian traffic	Mid-Term
Fund, design and build an extension of the existing trail at NB US 65 on the south side of Willow Creek; abandon the trail through West and East Interstate Parks	2	CIP; CAT; TE IDOT; IDNR	The existing trail east of S. Delaware is subject to frequent flooding. Maintain access from the Library to the creek, however	Mid-Term
Apply a creative lighting scheme to the bridges; work with Iowa DOT on lighting for South Washington and NB US 65 bridges	2	IGP; TE IDOT; City		Mid-Term
Widen the east sidewalk of the S. Monroe Ave. bridge and provide safety features	2	STP; Bridge replacement programs IDOT	Complete this as part of a bridge reconstruction project	Mid-Term
Work with housing developers to create new mixed use or multi-residential apartments and townhomes, especially in areas with dilapidated existing housing	2	Private investment; TIF; URTA City	Encourage use of urban revitalization tax abatement, other sources	Mid-Term
Evaluate the need for a parking structure to serve the major land uses in the planning area.	2	CIP, City general fund City	Monitor parking during major events and during high volume times; determine if impact warrants a structure	Mid-Term
If warranted, fund, design and build a new parking structure near the Multi-Purpose Arena	2	CIP; TIF; LOST; City general fund	Parking demand may move this property up in priority and timeframe	Mid-Term

PROJECT/POLICY/STRATEGY	PRIORITY	FUNDING/PARTNERS	COMMENTS	TIMEFRAME
Work with property owners to market and develop upland properties,	2	N/A MC Landlord Assoc.; NICED	Focus on areas near S. Washington Ave. in the S. Creekside area, and South Federal near the creek in the Corridor East area.	Mid-Term
Enhance the IA 122 corridor (5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> streets) with lighting, landscaping, and way-finding that reflect a unified theme and promote the River City brand	2	CIP; City general fund IDOT	Follow the Prairie Style theme already in place	Mid-Term
Seek a developer for the vacant former Shopko store and surrounding land	2	N/A MCCC; NICED; City	Focus search on a developer who will build according to Plan recommendations	Immediate
Encourage revenue-producing development in underutilized areas, such as large surface parking lots.	2	N/A MCCC; NICED		Mid-Term
Conduct a watershed study.	2	CIP; City general fund IDNR	Implement the recommendations of the study, to prevent infiltration and sedimentation	Mid-Term
Reconfigure West Interstate Park to make it more visible and usable	3	CIP; CAT IDNR	Remove brush and regrade to allow for an accessible path to the creek front. Provide recreational amenities and public art	Long Term
Upgrade open spaces along the creek with active and passive recreational amenities. Where needed, acquire additional land for public open space	3	CIP; CAT IDNR	Improve the area between S. Madison Ave. and the creek; provide trail access at 3 <sup>rd</sup> St. SW near the creek; acquire land near the Alliant substation on the south side of the creek at S. Delaware Avenue	Mid-Term
Fund, design and build a trail on the north side of Willow Creek between 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street SW and NB US 65, with a pedestrian bridge connecting it to the trail to the south	3	CIP; CAT IDNR	This may require loss of parking spaces in the parking lot serving the mall, arena, and the hotel	Long Term

**Acronyms:**

CAT	Community Attraction and Tourism Fund (State)
CIP	Capital Improvements Plan (City)
IDOT	Iowa Department of Transportation
IEDA	Iowa Economic Development Authority
IDNR	Iowa Department of Natural Resources
IGP	Iowa Great Places Program (State)
LOST	Local Option Sales Tax (City)
NICED	North Iowa Corridor Economic Development Corp.
MCCC	Mason City Chamber of Commerce
MSMC	Main Street Mason City
STP	IDOT Surface Transportation Program (State)
TE	IDOT Transportation Enhancements Program (State)
TIF	Tax Increment Financing (City)
URTA	Urban Revitalization Tax Abatement (City)

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## APPENDIX

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## APPENDIX A – 2004 WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN EXHIBITS

Figure 4:  
Alternative 1A

### LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

#### LEGEND

##### LAND USE:

- PUBLIC
- PARK/ OPEN SPACE
- RESIDENTIAL
- OFFICE
- COMMERCIAL
- MIXED USE

##### DESIGN ELEMENTS:

- WAYFINDING
- GATEWAY
- TRAIL
- ENHANCED STREET
- CONNECTOR STREETS

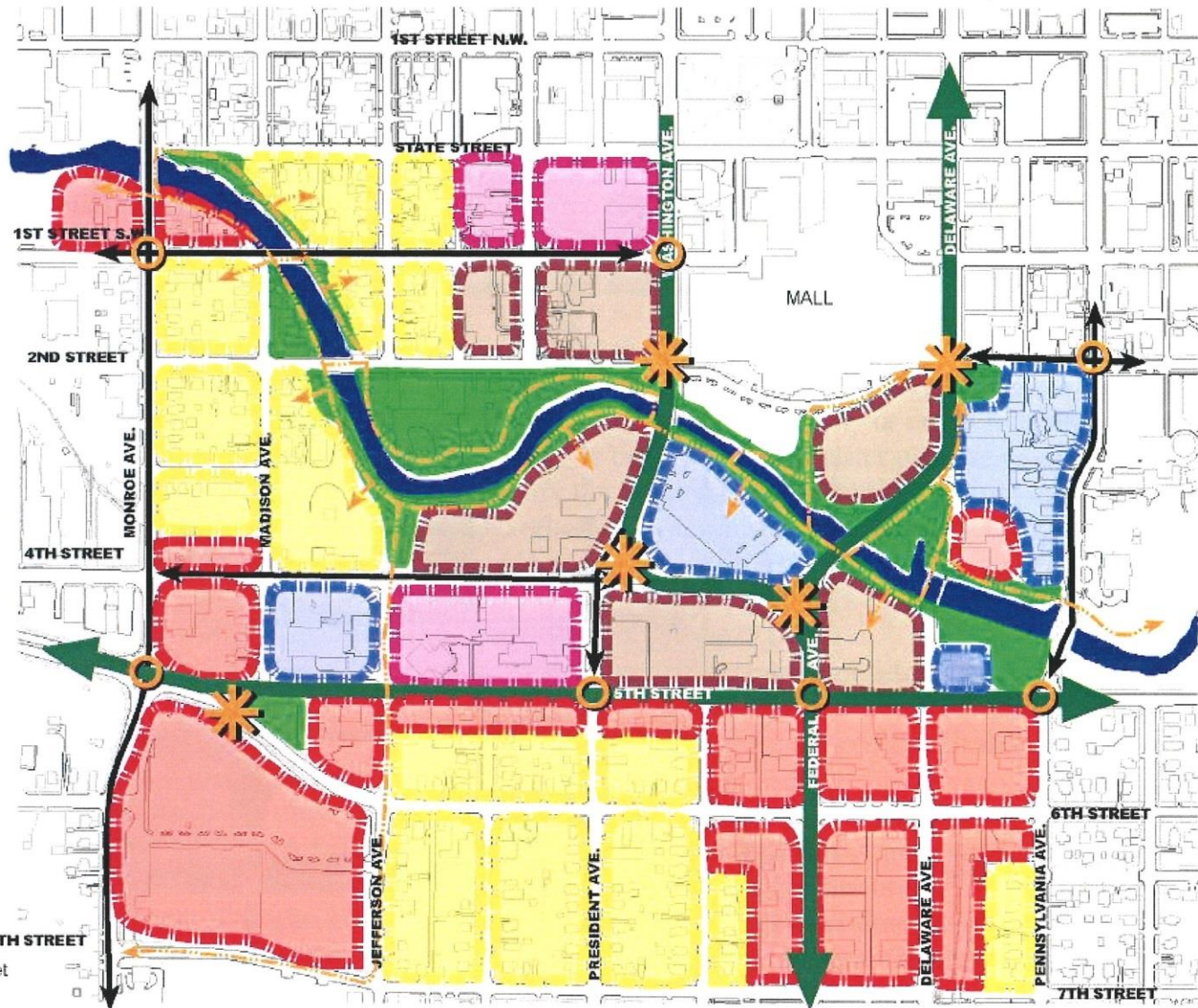
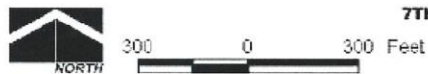


Figure 5:  
Alternative 1B  
LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT  
FRAMEWORK

**LEGEND**

- LAND USE:**
- PUBLIC
  - PARK/ OPEN SPACE
  - RESIDENTIAL
  - OFFICE
  - COMMERCIAL
  - MIXED USE
- DESIGN ELEMENTS:**
- WAYFINDING
  - GATEWAY
  - TRAIL
  - ENHANCED STREET
  - CONNECTOR STREETS

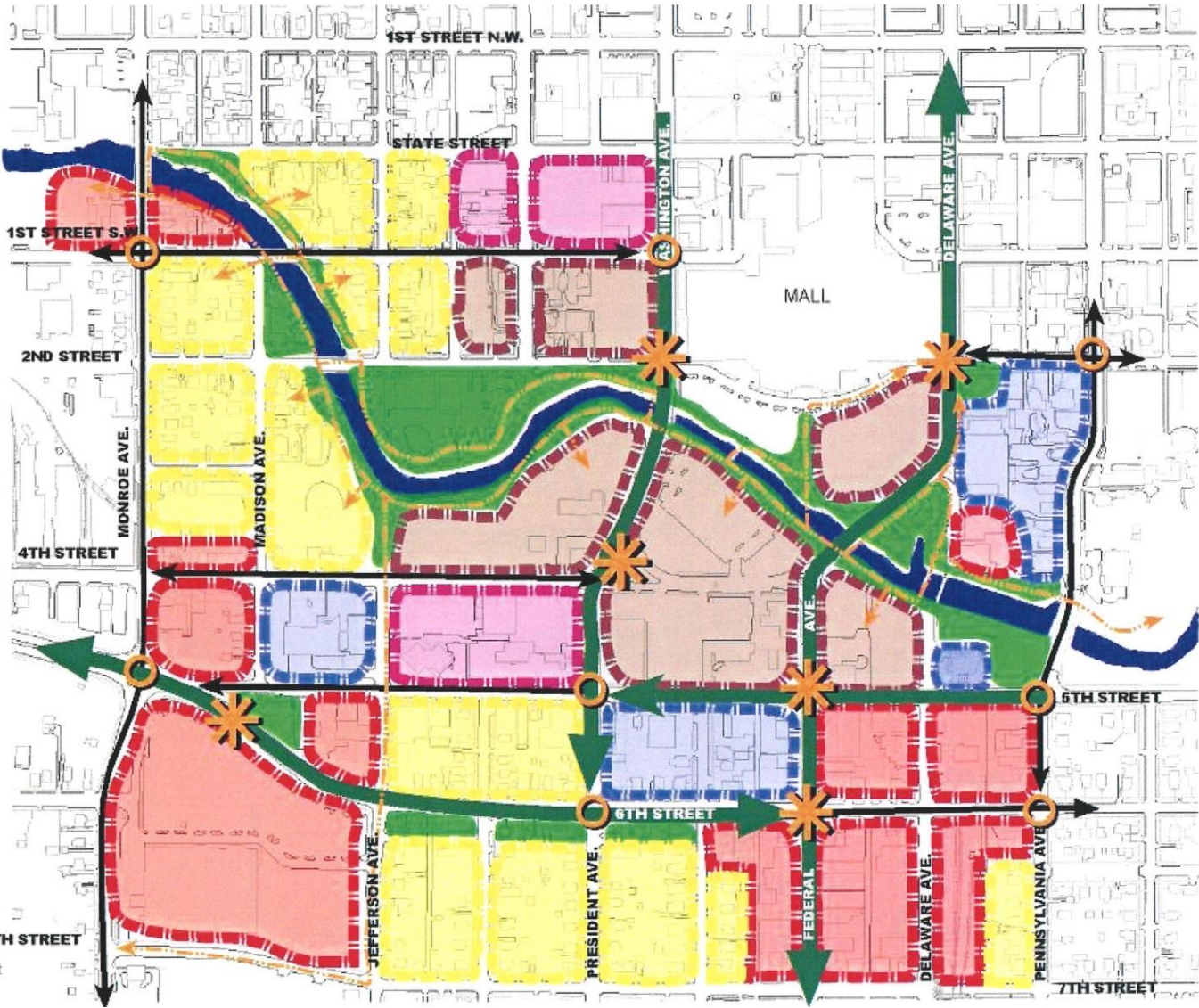


Figure 3:  
LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT  
FRAMEWORK

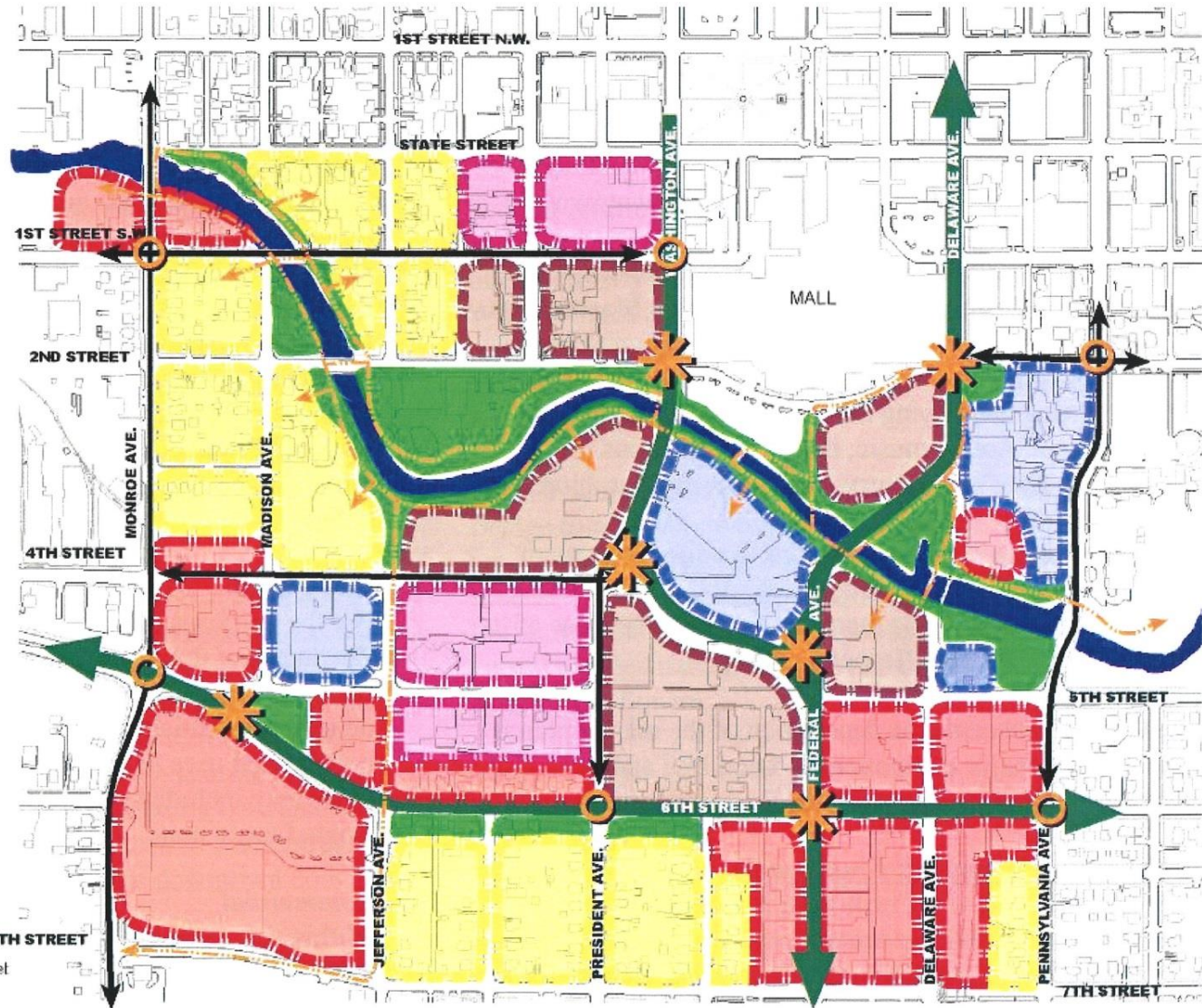
**LEGEND**

**LAND USE:**

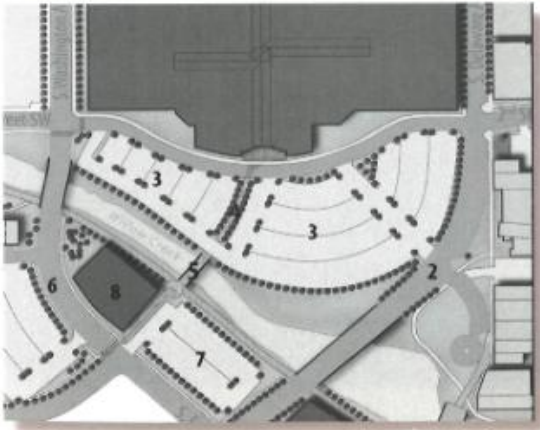
- PUBLIC
- PARK/ OPEN SPACE
- RESIDENTIAL
- OFFICE
- COMMERCIAL
- MIXED USE

**DESIGN ELEMENTS:**

- WAYFINDING
- GATEWAY
- TRAIL
- ENHANCED STREET
- CONNECTOR STREETS

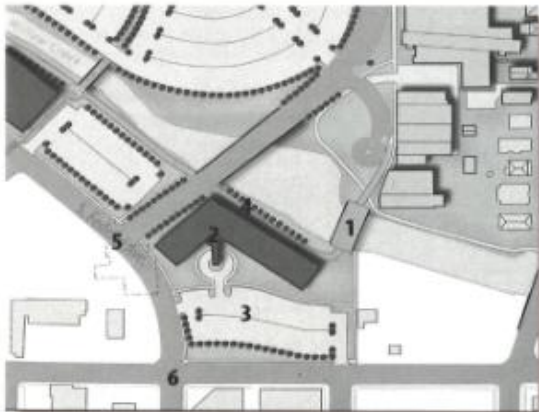


APPENDIX B – 2006 DOWNTOWN MASTER PLAN EXHIBITS



Above: 3D Rendering showing possible development in the Willow Creek Area.  
Below: Willow Creek Development Concept in plan perspective.

- 1 2nd Street Crossing
- 2 Delaware Crossing
- 3 Redesigned parking
- 4 Greenway link to Mall
- 5 Relocated pedestrian bridge
- 6 Federal/Washington connection
- 7 Overflow parking
- 8 Restaurant site



- 1 Delaware pedestrianized bridge
- 2 Mixed Use Building
- 3 Parking
- 4 CreekWalk
- 5 Realigned Federal/Washington way
- 6 5th and Federal Gateway



Above: 3D Concept Rendering of Delaware South Redevelopment. Concept shows a new mixed use building addressing the creek with parking in front.

Left: Gateway feature to downtown Mason City at 5th Street and Federal.

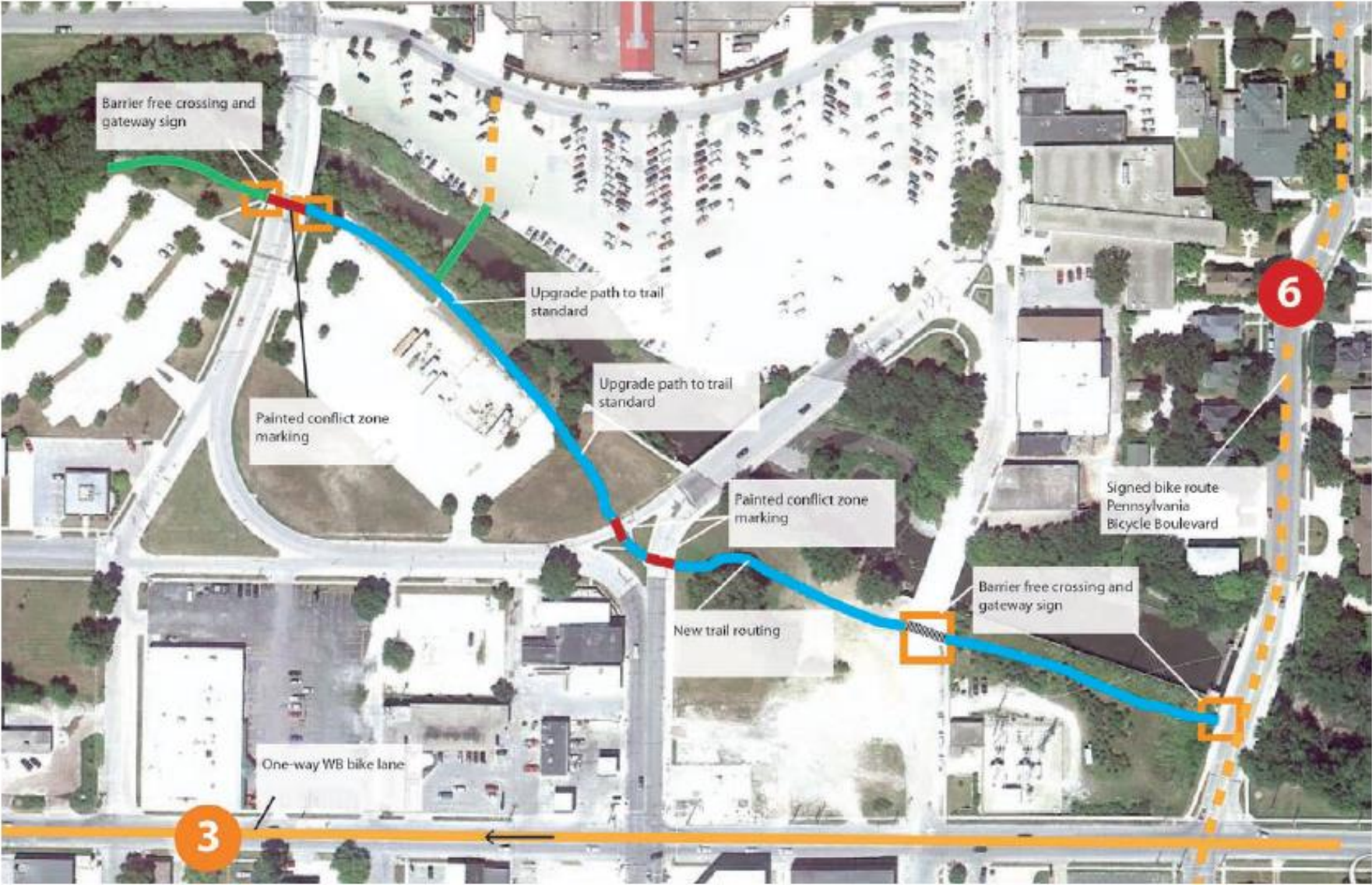


- 1 Washington Ave Bridge
- 2 Residential Rows
- 3 CreekWalk
- 4 Bagel Depot
- 5 Principal overflow parking
- 6 Trail bridge
- 7 New Park

APPENDIX C – ACTIVATING MASON CITY BICYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN MASTER PLAN EXHIBITS



**T1** Willow Creek Trail Development Concepts



**T7** Downtown Connectors



## APPENDIX D – PUBLIC WORKSHOP, JANUARY 30, 2020

Several displays were spaced about the room; participants were asked to write comments on “sticky” notes and attach them to the relevant display. Following is a summary of those comments, with references to the relevant sections within the Plan.



Goal 1, action “a” (see page 20), *Clean up the brush and volunteer trees along the creek to improve views and allow direct access to the shoreline.* **Comment:** “And sunshine!”

Goal 2, Improve the Willow Creek Trail (page 20): **Comments:**

I think this should be 1<sup>st</sup>.

What other safety improvements are planned? Cameras?

Garbage receptacles. Safety!

Doggie clean up bags/trash.

Great to hear about trail connections and improvement.

Yay! I second that!

Goal 3, action “a” (page 20), *Extend the Downtown public art and sculpture program to the Willow Creek Corridor.* **Comment:** A walkable downtown attracts visitors!

Goal 3, action “c” (page 20), *Seek traditional downtown-type businesses that take advantage of the creekside/trailside location: restaurants, taverns, bike shops, etc. Provide opportunities for existing businesses to be oriented to the creek.* **Comments:**

Bookstore/Coffee shop, restaurant, recreational water rental.

Two deck boardwalk, tiki bar.

Goal 5, action “a” (page 21), *Create a “Friends of Willow Creek” organization, to concentrate on improvements along the creek, to maintain the corridor, and advocate for keeping the Willow Creek corridor clean and safe.* **Comment:** Love it!

Goal 7, action “a” (page 21), *Design and install lighting, landscaping, gateway elements, and wayfinding signs that improve the user’s experience of the IA 122 and US 65 corridors and provide directions to Downtown. These improvements should reflect a common theme that celebrates Mason City’s musical and architectural brand.* **Comment:** This is awesome!

Land Use Plan (Map 8, page 24): **Comments:**

4-way stop sign at corner of Madison and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW.

Bring fishing back. CLEAN IT UP.

Dirt bike path on NORTH side of creek from President to Madison.

Bike pump track and skills park on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SW.



## APPENDIX E – ADOPTING RESOLUTION

### RESOLUTION NO. 20 - 63

A RESOLUTION APPROVING THE “WILLOW CREEK MASTER PLAN 2020”, FOR THE CITY OF MASON CITY, IOWA

WHEREAS, the Planning and Zoning Commission of the City of Mason City, Iowa, did heretofore, on the 24th day of March, 2020, unanimously recommend approval of the “Willow Creek Master Plan 2020”, and

WHEREAS, it is the desire of the City Council of the City of Mason City to adopt the “Willow Creek Master Plan 2020.”

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the City Council of the City of Mason City, Iowa:

Section 1: That the “Willow Creek Master Plan 2020” be and the same is hereby is approved.

PASSED AND APPROVED this 7th day of April, 2020.

/s/Bill Schickel  
Bill Schickel, Mayor

ATTEST:

/s/Aaron Burnett

Aaron Burnett, City Clerk



