

Downtown Columbia

STRATEGIC PLAN & DESIGN GUIDELINES



April 15, 2025



MKSK

WHITE &
SMITH, LLC

Downtown Columbia Strategic Plan

The City of Columbia thanks the hundreds of Columbia residents that participated through this process by attending engagement events, responding to online surveys, or providing feedback as stakeholders. We thank their passion and dedication to downtown — this vision is for them.

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Executive Summary

This community-driven vision for Downtown Columbia will refresh and improve the quality of its public realm through six big ideas.

Through community open houses, and two rounds of mobile workshops, stakeholder roundtables, and online surveys, more than 1,100 Columbia residents expressed their concerns and aspirations for downtown.

Through the hundreds of comments, stickers in activities, and survey responses, these residents passionately described a downtown that is both cherished, yet beaming with missed opportunities. They described a disconnected and underutilized riverfront, streets far too wide to feel comfortable for anything other than driving, intersections that feel designed to move cars quickly at the cost of pedestrian safety. At the same time, residents described a vibrant and walkable Main Street, cool things to see, and a place they love to call home. An overview of the



engagement process and its results are provided in the second chapter of this document.

From this feedback, the planning team developed six big ideas to help improve safety and comfort in the short term, and to position downtown for long-term success and growth. The six big ideas represent the varied interests in downtown's public realm, from creating new trails and walkable connections, to having a dedicated organization to steer programming and marketing.

1,100+
Columbia voices engaged through this process

717
Online Survey Responses

9
Stakeholder Roundtables

5
Mobile workshops downtown

50
Stakeholders engaged in roundtables

60+
Mobile Workshops participants

210+
Community Open House Attendees

These six ideas for downtown are summarized in the third chapter of this document, and are as follows:

- ▶ **Idea 1 | Highlight:** Create two trail loops through downtown — the Vista Loop and Capitol Loop — to help connect destinations and highlight downtown’s unique qualities.
- ▶ **Idea 2 | Refresh:** Improve downtown’s tree canopy and green spaces to help foster a more comfortable and resilient urban district.
- ▶ **Idea 3 | Connect:** Improve safety at downtown intersections to help protect pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles.
- ▶ **Idea 4 | Reclaim:** Right-size excess right-of-way at downtown streets for pedestrian and cyclist space.
- ▶ **Idea 5 | Champion:** Provide dedicated stewardship of Downtown’s public spaces to keep them clean, safe, active, and beautiful.
- ▶ **Idea 6 | Streamline:** Adopt user and business-friendly design guidelines to protect downtown’s long-term economic competitiveness and real estate value.

Each idea is described in further detail with supporting data, examples of community support, and an implementation matrix that provides guidance on key next steps to transform these from idea to reality.

Six Big Ideas for Downtown



1 | Highlight

Build an urban trail to connect and highlight the unique qualities and competitive strengths of Downtown Columbia



2 | Refresh

Create comfortable streets and public spaces that welcome visitors and support everyday living



3 | Connect

Short term **solutions for intersection safety** improvements along the major arterial streets in downtown



4 | Reclaim

Re-allocating right-of-way to strengthen business vitality and pedestrian safety



5 | Champion

Dedicated maintenance and programming of public open space



6 | Streamline

Update Design Guidelines to protect the long-term economic competitiveness and real estate value of downtown





Downtown Columbia

STRATEGIC PLAN & DESIGN GUIDELINES

01

Introduction

About this Plan

A refreshed vision for Downtown Columbia's built environment, 25 years in the making.

The City of Columbia launched the Downtown Columbia Strategic Plan and Design Guidelines planning process together with MKSK and White and Smith. Through this effort, the team worked with the Columbia community to discern a refreshed vision for the quality of the built environment downtown. It has been 25 years since the adoption of the City Center Master Plan and more than 15 years since the adoption of the Innovista Master Plan.

A lot has changed in the year since these plans were adopted. Major infrastructure projects have been completed or are underway, thousands of housing units have been built, and the City has adopted both a new Unified Development Ordinance and Comprehensive Plan (Columbia Compass). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people use downtowns

and new trends in transportation have created shared and electric alternatives to traditional vehicular transport.

This two-part planning process kicked off in February and involved synthesizing previous planning efforts taken on by the City of Columbia into a new set of goals and objectives for this planning effort. These goals and objectives were vetted through a community process to create a vision for Downtown Columbia that strategically enhanced the public spaces of this beloved downtown.



The Downtown Columbia Strategic Plan and Design Guidelines will discern a refreshed vision for the quality of the built environment downtown. This new plan will:

- ▶ **Create a community-driven vision** for the public character of downtown
- ▶ **Establish priorities for public policy** and public investment in the downtown built environment
- ▶ **Protect the unique character and assets** of the historic urban core
- ▶ **Form the basis for Downtown Design Guidelines** to help shape great public spaces

Downtown Study Area

The Downtown Study Area, as seen in the map below, includes parts of downtown covered by the City Center and Innovista Overlay districts, which generally includes Elmwood Avenue on the north to Catawba Street on the south and Pickens Street to the east and the Congaree River to the west.

City Center Master Plan: 26 Years Old



Innovista Master Plan: 18 Years Old

Process and Timeline

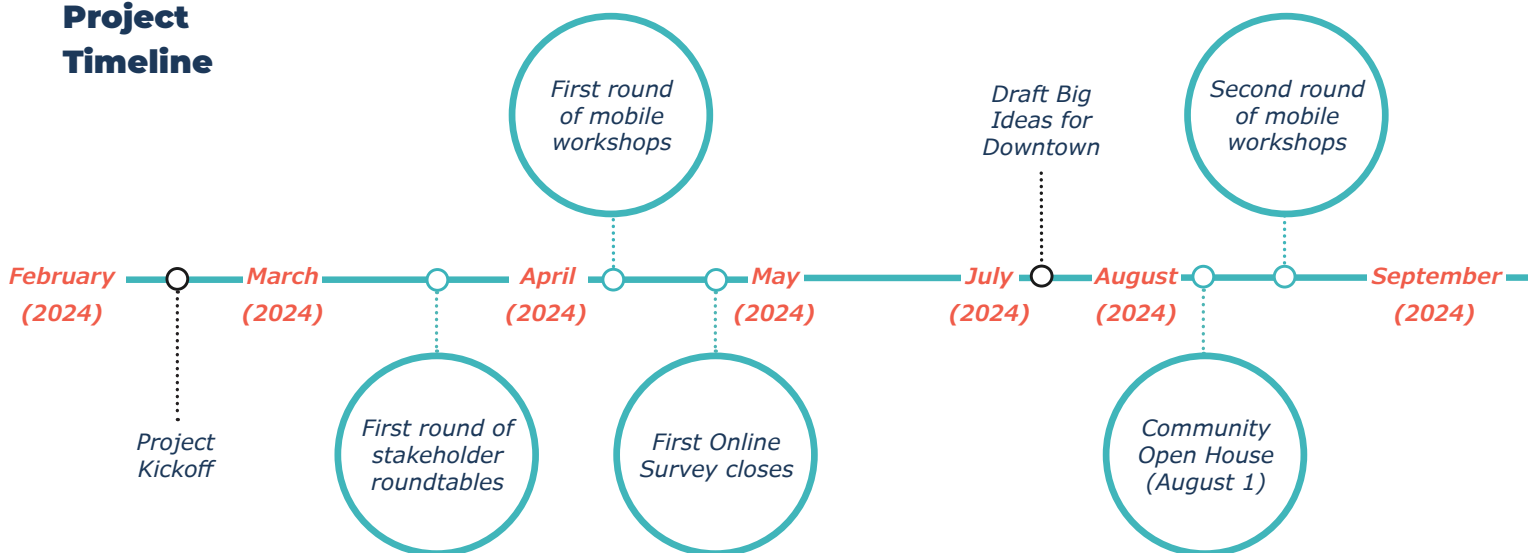
One process for two deliverables — this Strategic Downtown Plan and a set of consolidated Design Guidelines — in a 10-month timeline.

The project comprises two parts: the Downtown Strategic Plan and the Design Guidelines. To address the community's goals and vision, the Planning Team began with community engagement, previous downtown plans, and existing conditions analysis to guide the objectives of the Strategic Plan. The

design guidelines were formed with the guidance of downtown stakeholders and city leadership. The guidelines were reviewed and vetted through another round of engagement with the downtown stakeholders and city leaders to confirm the direction of the document.

The project began in February of 2024 with a project kick-off with the City and Planning team, after two rounds of community engagement, and touchpoints with the downtown stakeholders and city leaders the Downtown Columbia Strategic Plan and Design Guidelines were completed in April of 2025. The project timeline and milestones can be seen in the graphic below.

Project Timeline



This two-part planning process kicked off in February, taking the work the City of Columbia began through previous planning efforts to create a vision for Downtown Columbia that will **strategically enhance the public spaces of this beloved Downtown.**

Consultant Team:



Lead, Urban & Land Use Planning



Design Guidelines

Draft Downtown Strategic Plan & Design Guidelines

January (2025)

February (2025)

March (2025)

May (2025)

June (2025)

Downtown Design Guidelines Open House

Final Documents to DDRC and PC

Second round of stakeholder roundtables

Anticipated Adoption

Plan Alignment

A summary of recent and relevant past plans and their respective recommendations impacting Downtown Columbia.

The City of Columbia has a handful of focused and multifaceted planning efforts that have been influencing Downtown over the last decade. This Plan Alignment seeks to acknowledge those efforts, building upon some of their momentum and recommendations, while identifying common themes that have been repeated across multiple plans.

One foundational theme from past plans is that **Downtown Columbia has a lot of the pieces, they just need to be connected, leveraged, and celebrated.** This emerged from talks with the community during the *Public Space Public Life Action Plan*. *Walk Bike*

“Streets are the primary public spaces in the district and they need to be made more vibrant & interactive”

West Gervais District Plan (2017)

Columbia was a planning initiative that echoed this sentiment, recommending the enhancement of connectivity between the Three Rivers Greenway, the Statehouse, USC campus and each of the major business districts downtown. *The South Main Capital District Area Plan* points out that the landscaped grounds of the State House Complex are a huge community asset, and pedestrian connections to it should be enhanced.

Another critical and often reiterated theme is that **streets are the major frontier for improving downtown.**

Columbia Compass: Envision 2036 is the City's comprehensive blueprint for where it wants to go over the next decade. It states that because downtown is an economic hub for the region, a connected multi-modal network where transportation safety is improved for all users

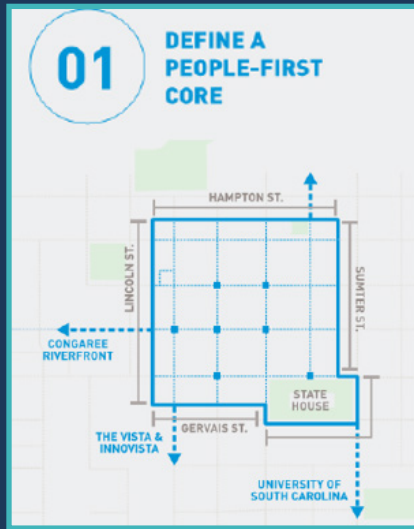
Plans Reviewed:

- ▶ **City Center Master Plan** (1999)
- ▶ **Innovista Master Plan** (2007)
- ▶ **Innovista Design District Guidelines** (2009, Updated 2018)
- ▶ **Walk Bike Columbia** (2015)
- ▶ **Public Space, Public Life Action Plan** (2016)
- ▶ **South Main Capital District Area Plan** (2017)
- ▶ **West Gervais District Plan** (2017)
- ▶ **West Gervais Historic Commercial District & Protection Area** (2017)
- ▶ **Columbia Compass: Envision 2036** (2020)

SOUTH MAIN CAPITAL DISTRICT (2017)



PUBLIC SPACE PUBLIC LIFE ACTION PLAN (2016)



WEST GERVAIS DISTRICT PLAN (2017)



is critical for its long-term health. It also encourages great street design.

The *West Gervais District Plan* concludes that streets are the primary public spaces in the district and need to be made more vibrant and interactive. In this plan, 80% of respondents outreached said they would like to see slower traffic speeds, better sidewalk connections and increased space for outdoor dining.

Another dominant theme from past planning efforts is that **people desire a Downtown Columbia that is safe, inviting and comfortable.** Safety is

“People pay to sit - cafe and outdoor restaurant seats are constantly filled. People want to be outside when the weather is nice”

Public Space Public Life Action Plan (2016)

an extension of the existing condition of Downtown’s streets because they are unbalanced, often too wide and dangerous for pedestrians and bikers to feel they can move seamlessly through downtown. This safety concern was highlighted by both *Walk Bike Columbia* and the *South Main Capital District Area Plan*. The desire for an inviting downtown was articulated through the *Public Space Public Life Action Plan*, where citizens expressed a thirst for places that draw you in and illicit a sense of surprise, where families feel invited to take part in downtown’s activities. Signage that is largely auto-oriented is a hindrance to people feeling invited and finding their way to Columbia’s unique assets.

In respect to comfort, the *West Gervais District Plan* advocates that sidewalks should do more than accommodate walking, but should include

places for standing, visiting with others, and sitting. It also emphasizes the importance of trees in downtown, stating that **shade is a critical part of the public realm** that can make the difference between a space being pleasant or uncomfortable.

Columbians are proud of their city and feel **Columbia’s distinct history should be celebrated through increasing public art**, particularly in reclaimed public spaces, per *Columbia Compass: Envision 2036*. The *West Gervais District Plan* also recommends that public art should anchor and activate sites within that district while helping to create places of congregation and activity.

Existing Conditions Overview

An analysis of the current conditions of Downtown (included as an appendix) provides a foundation for the rest of the planning process.

To understand the current makeup of the approximately 1,780 acres that constitute Downtown Columbia, the planning team analyzed several datasets.

Several key findings are oriented around the highly public/institutional nature of Downtown Columbia. **Over half (54%) of property Downtown is publicly owned land.** This includes public Right-of-way, most of which are 100 feet in width, regardless of traffic function.

The **South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) owns and maintains a significant amount of roadway in Downtown.** Over the five years between 2017-2021, more than half of the 7,575 vehicular incidents in Downtown occurred along three SCDOT-owned streets: Huger Street, Assembly Street, and Gervais Street.

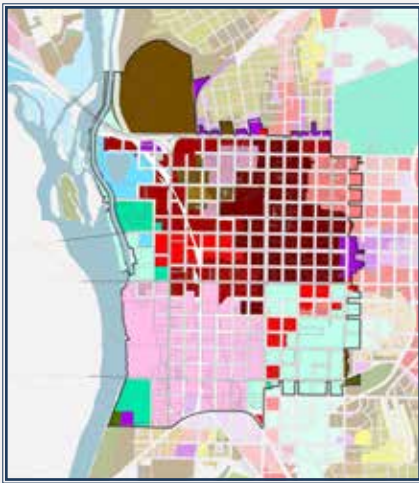
Examination of the existing tree canopy Downtown highlights pockets of ample tree cover interspersed among areas that lack the presence of trees, particularly mature trees. In total, **tree canopy covers about 16% of Downtown Columbia.**

The Downtown Planning Area contains **four different historic districts.** They are the Governor's Mansion, the Landmark District, the West Gervais Historic Commercial District, and the West Gervais Protection Area.

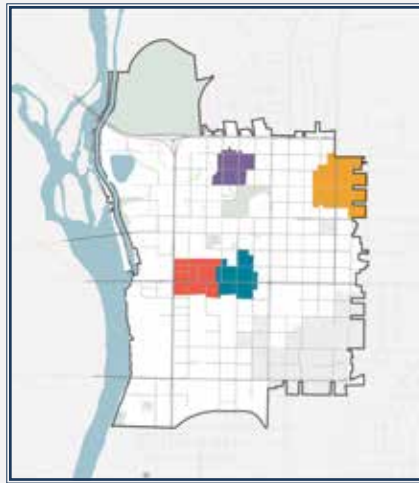
A more comprehensive exploration of the existing conditions analysis can be found in the Downtown Columbia Strategic Plan appendix, included as a separate document.

Existing Conditions Examined

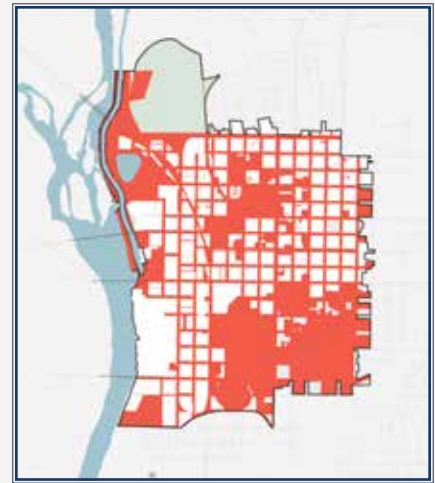
- ▶ Design Districts
- ▶ Historic Districts
- ▶ Zoning
- ▶ Public Property
- ▶ Speed Limits
- ▶ Vehicular Counts & Incidents
- ▶ Street Ownership
- ▶ Tree Canopy
- ▶ Right-of-Way Widths
- ▶ Trails/Bike Lanes
- ▶ Major Utilities



Zoning Districts



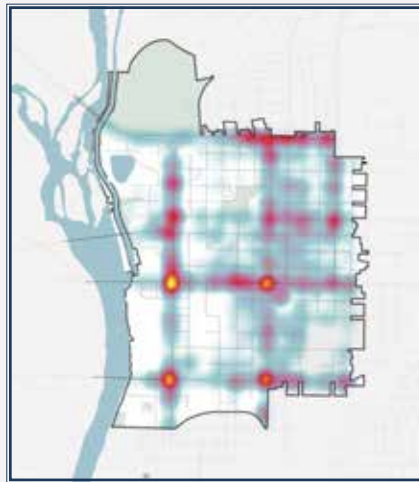
Historic Districts



Public Property
(Including Right-of-Way)



Speed Limits



Vehicular Incidents (2017-2021)



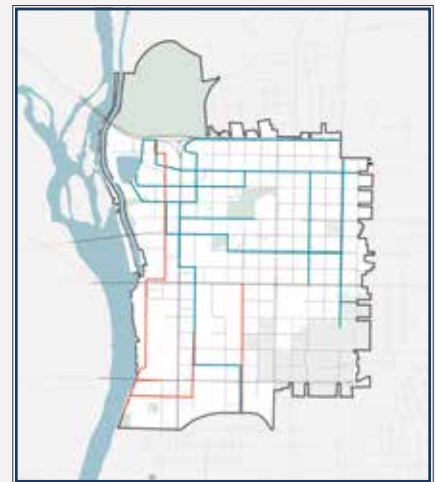
Street Ownership



Tree Canopy



Trails & Bike Lanes



Major Water & Sewer Facilities



Downtown Columbia

STRATEGIC PLAN & DESIGN GUIDELINES



03

Community
Engagement

What the Columbia Community is Saying

Through stakeholder roundtables, online surveys, an Open House and mobile workshops, the Columbia Community shared their passion for downtown.

The following pages show a summary of how the planning team has engaged with the Columbia community in the development of this strategic plan for downtown between March 2024 and April of 2025.

- **Nine stakeholder roundtables** with those most invested and interested in downtown and its success, on March 26/27, 2024 and a second round on March 5, 2025.
- **An online survey** gathering 717 total responses, conducted between March and April 2024.
- **Two rounds of mobile workshops** around downtown, engaging residents, businesses, and students in April 2024 and September 2024.
- **An online website** with project information, links and event dates to get involved, and project contacts.
- **Two rounds of open house events** to engage directly with Columbia residents.

717
Online Survey
Responses

9
Stakeholder
Roundtables
(in two rounds)

9
Mobile workshops
around downtown
(in two rounds)

50
Total stakeholders
engaged

60+
Mobile Workshops
participants

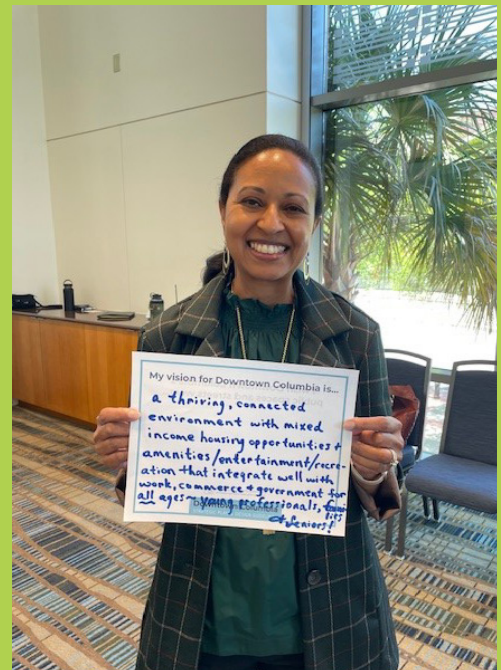
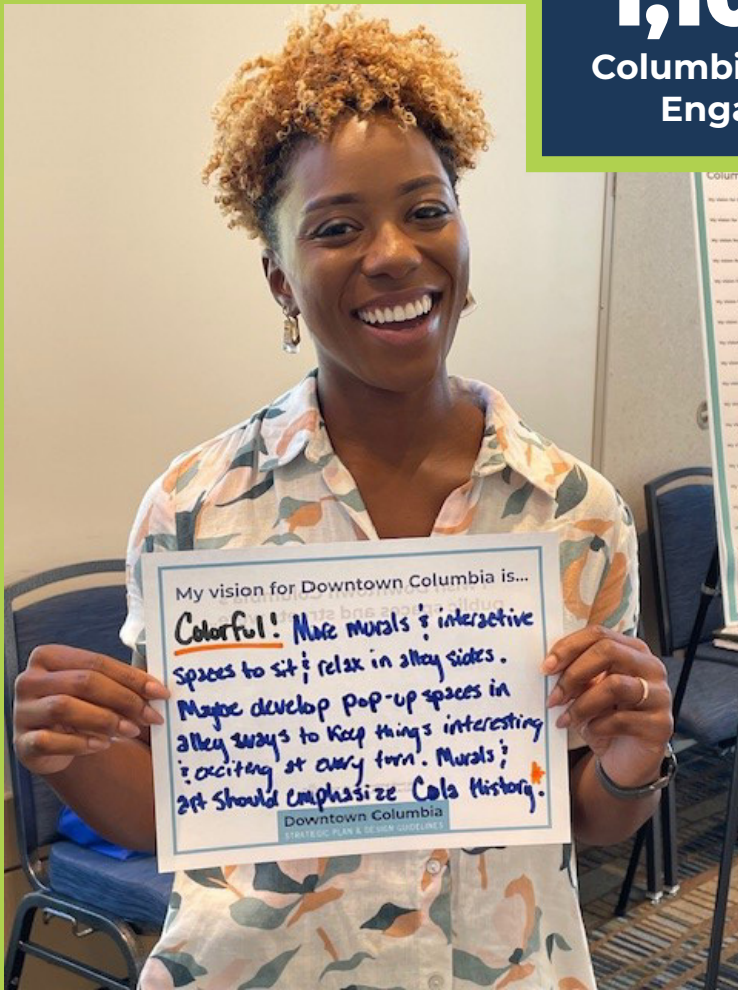
210+
Community Open
House Attendees

Top: Stakeholder Roundtables with Developers; USC Students participating in Mobile Workshops

Middle & Bottom: Participants and City Manager at the Convention Center and Arsenal Hill Mobile Workshops



1,100+
Columbia Voices
Engaged



Online Survey Results

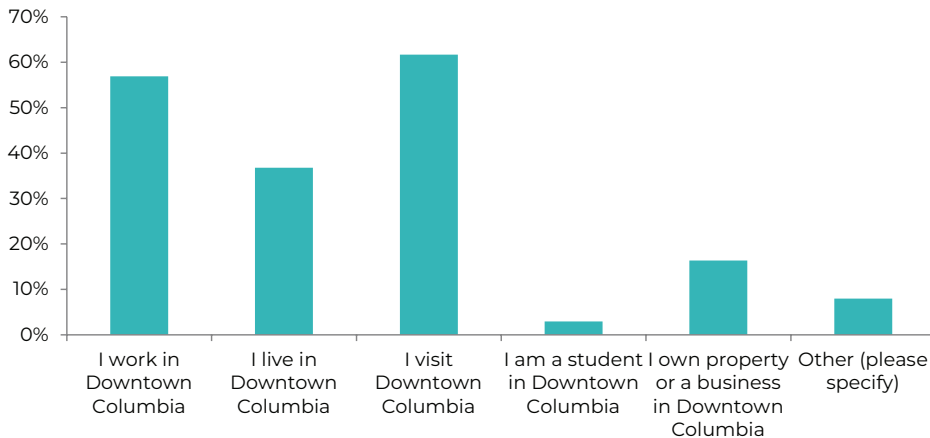
To understand online survey participants' connection to Downtown Columbia, the planning team asked a few questions about their experience with downtown. The results show that a majority of online survey participants visit, live and/or work Downtown Columbia and more than 70% of the participants visit downtown at least once a week.

A big takeaway from the online survey was the overwhelming consensus amongst community members, over 96% agreement, that it is

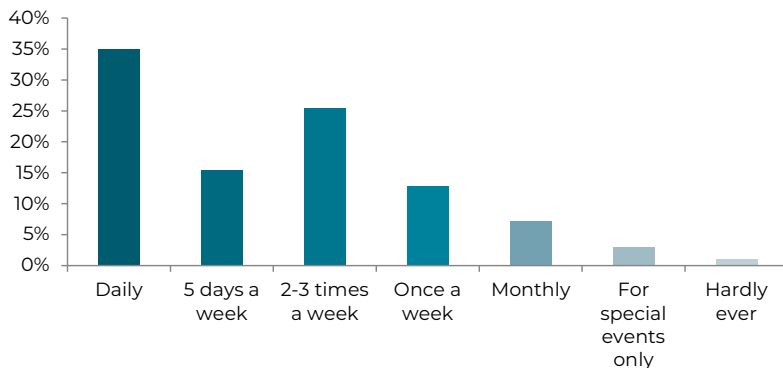
important to create great public spaces in Downtown Columbia which includes: streets, sidewalks, plazas, parks and greens.

The most prioritized statements from the community related to the urban tree canopy. They included: *"street trees providing cooling shade for pedestrians"* followed by *"A tree-lined landscape separating pedestrians from street traffic."* The least prioritized statements were more car-centric statements such as *"curbside spaces for ride-sharing vehicles to pick-up and drop-off."*

What is your connection to Downtown Columbia?



How often do you visit downtown or The Vista?



Mobile Workshops

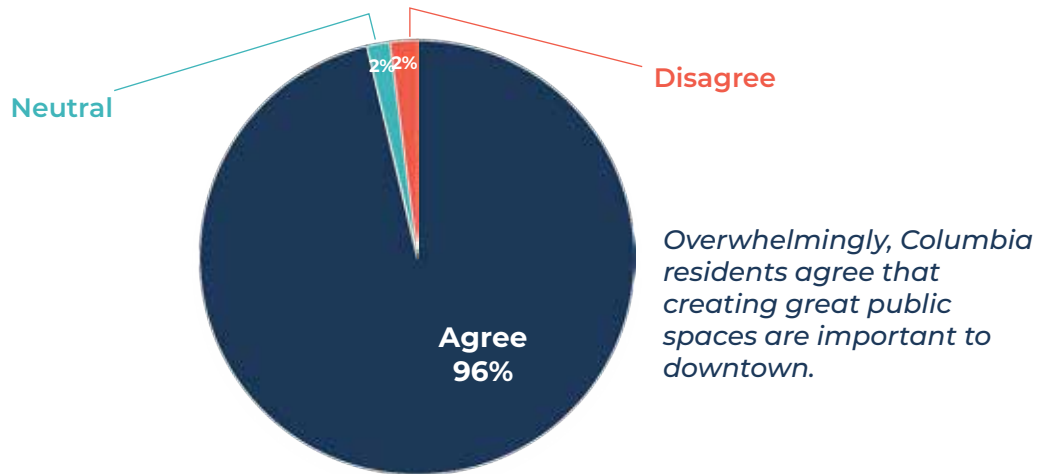


Top: Tim shares his vision for downtown

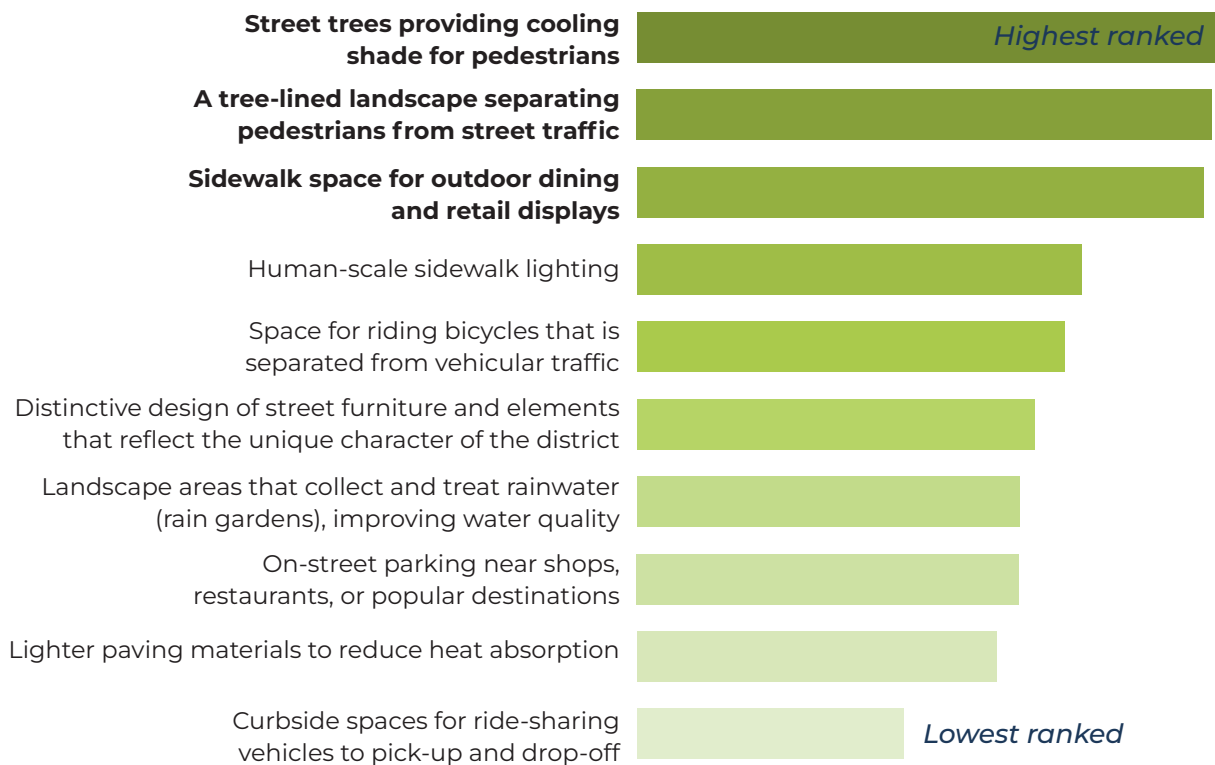
Middle: USC Students sharing their vision for downtown

Bottom: Participants at the Convention Center

The Downtown Plan and Design Guidelines are based on the premise that creating great public spaces – streets, sidewalks, plazas, parks and greens – is essential for a healthy economy and for the daily comfort and needs of those that live and work in Columbia. Do you agree or disagree with the importance of creating great public spaces in Downtown Columbia?



What makes a great downtown street? Rank the following in order of priority.



Online survey participants picked a place in Downtown Columbia that made them feel safe and described why in a follow-up prompt. There were 4 groups of locations that people identified the Canalside, Main Street, the State House and The Vista. Most participants described how pleasant it was to walk along those streets because

they felt safe, had shade from street trees and had a lot to do like shopping and dining.

The areas where most participants felt unsafe, shown in the map in the following spread, were Assembly Street, Huger Street, Finlay Park and Elmwood Street. Participants described these streets as feeling like interstates where cars were free to speed

through wide lanes, with no clear prioritization for safe crossings for people walking or biking. Although Finlay Park is undergoing a major upgrade the community's perception was that there was an unhoused issue that needed to be addressed.

What are Downtown Columbia's three most iconic, memorable, or cool places?



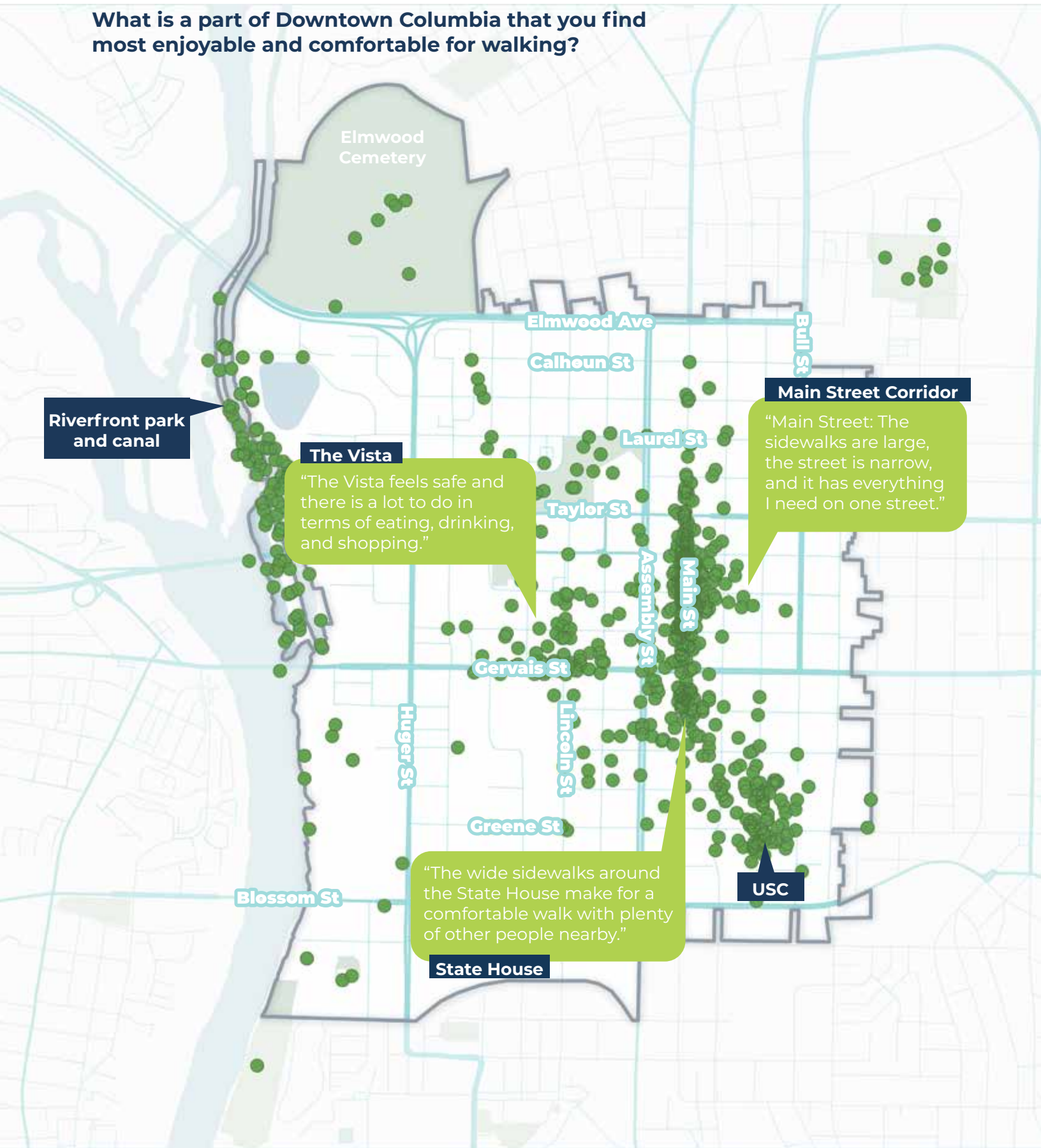
- 6. Soda City Market - 78 mentions
- 7. Art Museum - 77 mentions
- 8. Finlay Park - 44 mentions
- 9. Nickelodeon Theater - 27 mentions
- 10. State Museum - 21 mentions

You're showing off Downtown Columbia to a first-time visitor from out of town - where do you take them?



- 6. USC Campus/Horseshoe - 131 mentions
- 7. Museum of Art - 38 mentions
- 8. Five Points - 41 Mentions
- 9. Transmission Arcade - 20 mentions
- 10. Richland Library - 14 mentions

What is a part of Downtown Columbia that you find most enjoyable and comfortable for walking?



Riverfront park and canal

The Vista

“The Vista feels safe and there is a lot to do in terms of eating, drinking, and shopping.”

Main Street Corridor

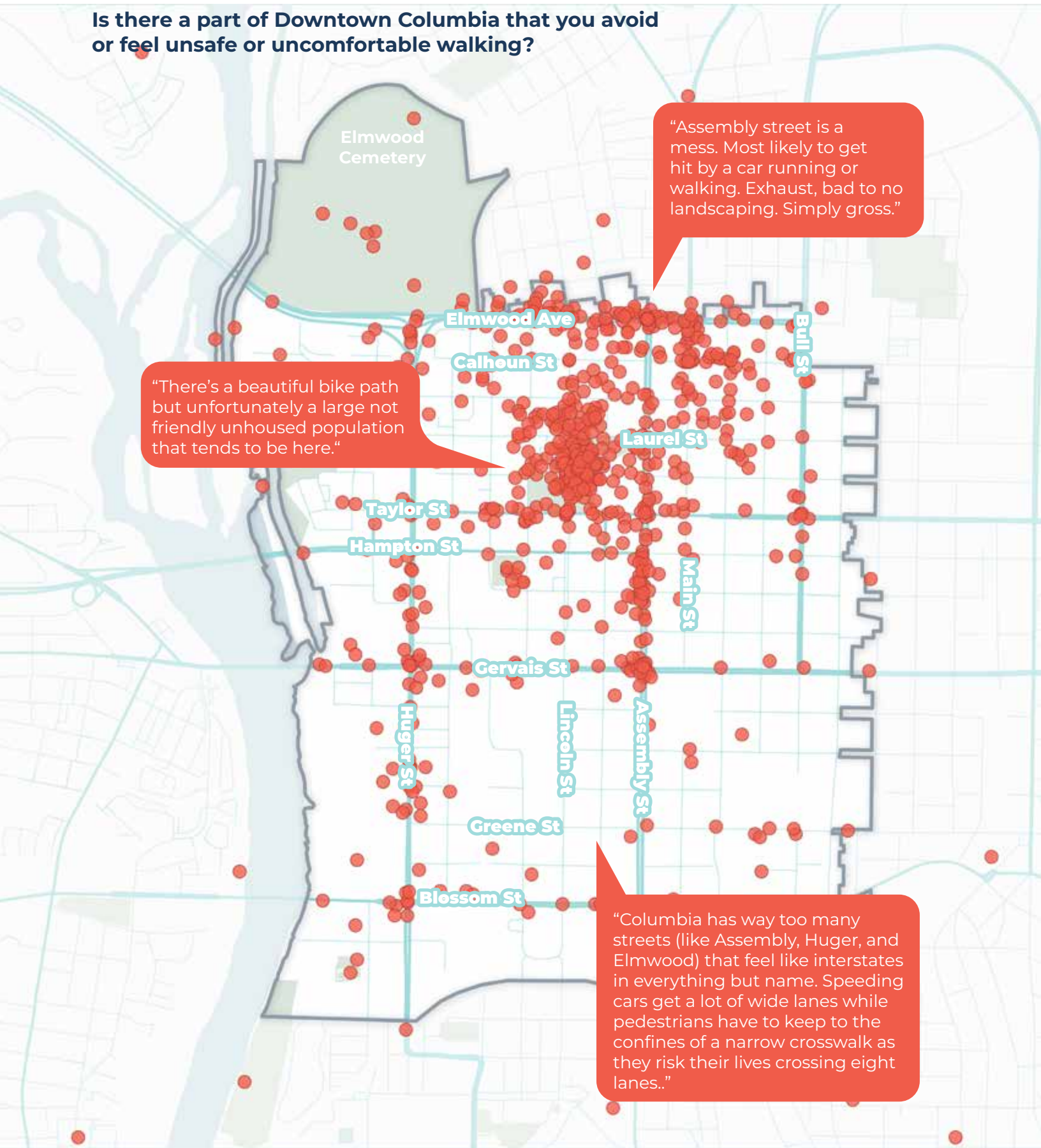
“Main Street: The sidewalks are large, the street is narrow, and it has everything I need on one street.”

State House

“The wide sidewalks around the State House make for a comfortable walk with plenty of other people nearby.”

USC

Is there a part of Downtown Columbia that you avoid or feel unsafe or uncomfortable walking?

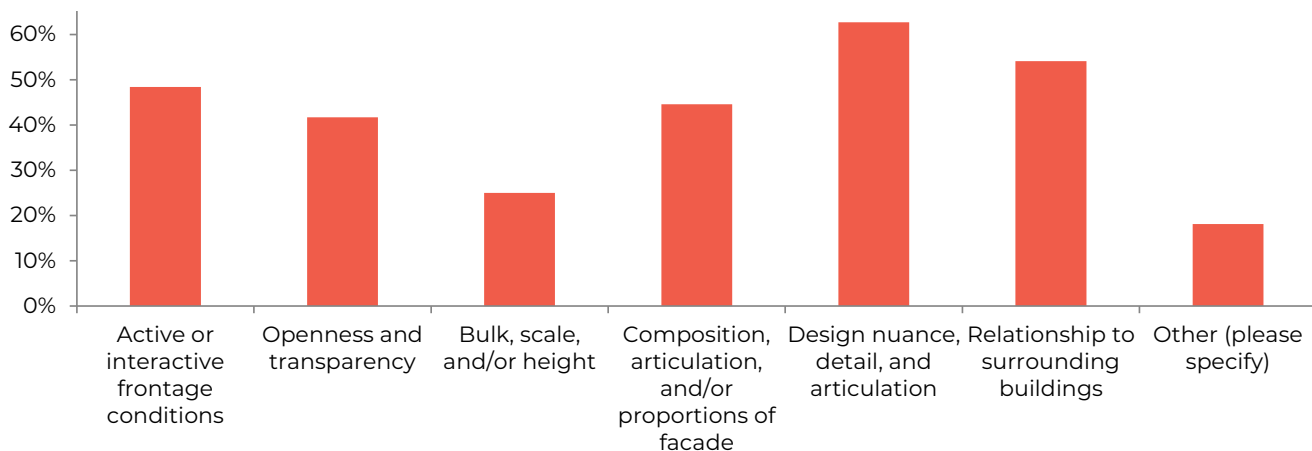


"There's a beautiful bike path but unfortunately a large not friendly unhoused population that tends to be here."

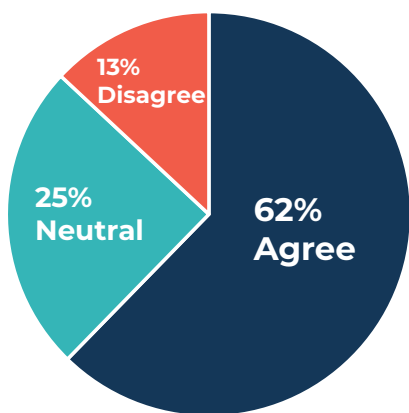
"Assembly street is a mess. Most likely to get hit by a car running or walking. Exhaust, bad to no landscaping. Simply gross."

"Columbia has way too many streets (like Assembly, Huger, and Elmwood) that feel like interstates in everything but name. Speeding cars get a lot of wide lanes while pedestrians have to keep to the confines of a narrow crosswalk as they risk their lives crossing eight lanes.."

What are methods in which buildings could best contribute to Downtown Columbia's sense of place and enhance its street life? (Select all that apply)



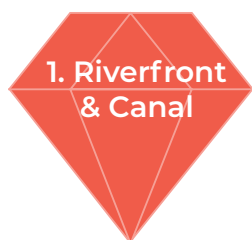
Do you agree or disagree with the statement: "Overall, recent development and building design in downtown has contributed to Downtown Columbia's sense of place and enhanced its street life."



"Some good developments have occurred, and some bad. I would say that any development that prioritizes walking and bicycling are good developments, and any that prioritize cars, specifically in downtown, are bad developments."

"The riverfront is Columbia's most impressive, yet neglected feature... All the attractions are setback from the river and are part of a concrete jungle without taking advantage of the nature beauty nearby."

What are the hidden jewels downtown? Describe the best places that may go unnoticed.



“Charleston and Greenville have really made their cities and streets inviting. They have focused on landscaping, street lighting and traffic signals.”

**What are great streets, districts, or neighborhoods you have visited in other cities?
What made these places special?**



Falls Park on The Reedy
Tree canopy



History mixed with new retail
Unique buildings



Tree lined streets
Vibrant nightlife



Active riverfront
Historic parks



Activities to do
Enjoy walking

Mobile Workshops (Round 1) Key Take Aways

The planning team conducted **five mobile workshops** across the Columbia community in April of 2024. This first round of workshops attracted 62 participants at the locations listed to the right. These conversations resulted in the following key take-aways summarizing the overall input:

- Arsenal Hill
- Convention Center
- Main Street District
- Columbia Tree & Appearance Committee (CTAC)
- USC Campus

Broadening **Understanding and Support** for Great Places/Great Downtown

Opportunity for **Distinctive Brand/Identity** of Downtown

Preserving and Strengthening Unique Districts

Connecting Assets Across a Large Downtown Geography

Improving Street-level Comfort, Safety, and Ambiance

Bridging Wide, Busy Streets (Huger, Assembly)

Dedicated **Stewardship of Public Open Space** and Green Space

Better Allocation of Right-of-Way for Business and Public Use

Urban Design **Expertise and Capacity of Planning & Zoning Staff**

Urban Design **Expertise and Training of BoZA**

Improving Street Level **Interest in Buildings**

Mitigating Summer **Heat**

Clarity of Entitlement **Process**

Fixing Specific **Gaps and Loopholes** in Ordinances and Guidelines

Stakeholder (Round 1) Key Take Aways

The planning team conducted six stakeholder roundtables on March 25, 2024, with those most invested and interested in downtown and its success, grouped by the categories on the right:

Design Community

Real Estate Professionals

Downtown Residents

Businesses/Property Owners

Institutions

City Staff and Boards

1

Enhance major corridors like Assembly and Huger Street to promote a comfortable walking and biking experience.

2

Improve connections in Downtown Columbia and prevent barriers to safe walking and crossing zones from the Riverfront and Canal to Bull Street.

3

Accentuate the existing character of Downtown Columbia to embrace the Historic charm and magnify the hidden jewels of downtown.

4

Support land uses that promote an all day city through a seamless Design Review Process.

5

Upgrade the Congaree Riverfront and Canal to invite more activity and private investment.



First Community Open House

The six big ideas were shared with the Columbia community at a Community Open House on Thursday, August 1, 2024 at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center.

The Community Open House took place over a morning/lunchtime session (11 am - 1:30 pm) and an afternoon session (4:00 pm - 6:30 pm). Columbia residents were invited to drop-in and visit during either of these times. Between 130 and 150 people attended this meeting throughout the day-long event.

This meeting featured stations introducing each big idea, each with activities to help the Planning Team understand how to refine these moving forward. The activities included open ended questions, map exercises, voting with chips, and a “build your own street” activity where people were able to design their ideal downtown street using a kit of parts.

As they came into the room, attendees were able to see results of the engagement in the Spring and were asked to place a blue sticker near their residence or neighborhood.

Where in Columbia do you live? Tell us using a sticker.



As seen on the map, those who attended the meeting live across the region, though are more concentrated in the neighborhoods within and around downtown.

The results and take-aways from this meeting are summarized in the Big Ideas section of this report, and help guide how these ideas are recommended to be implemented.



150
Open House
Attendees



Second Community Open House and Stakeholder Roundtables

Drafts of the Downtown Columbia Strategic Plan and Design Guidelines were shared with the community at 3 stakeholder roundtables and 2 open house events in March of 2025.

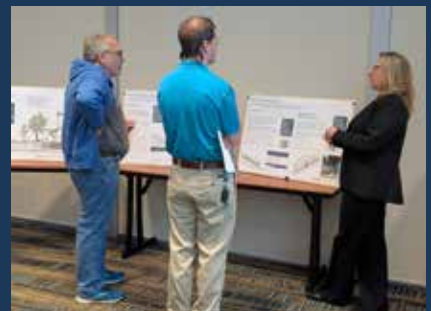
City of Columbia staff hosted two public open house events on Wednesday, March 12, 2025. These drop-in format open houses provided community members interested in the future of Downtown Columbia a chance to review the draft guidelines and the draft downtown strategic plan.

This engagement was amplified by three stakeholder roundtables with key community leaders, held on March 5 and attended by approximately 19 stakeholders. The conversation at these roundtables largely focused on the Design Guidelines, a key deliverable from this process and instrumental to implement the plan's six ideas.





64
Open House
Attendees



From Engagement to Six Big Ideas

The engagement process gave the planning team a deep understanding of community priorities. Aligning these priorities with solutions resulted in this plan's six big ideas.

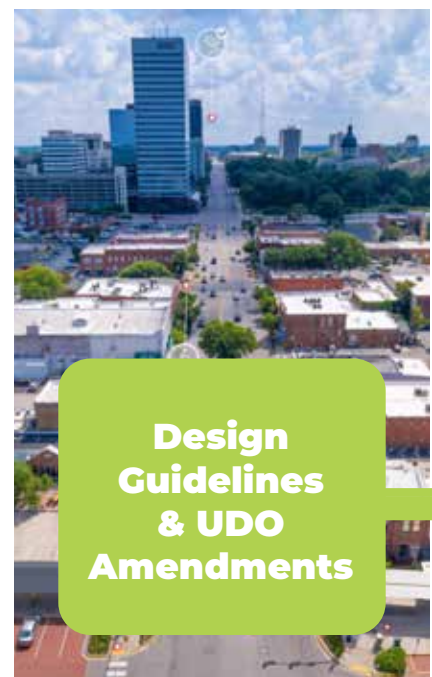
Through community open houses, stakeholder roundtables, two online surveys, two rounds of mobile workshops, and a project website, the Columbia community was actively engaged in shaping the recommendations in this plan. As detailed in this section, the engagement process resulted in hundreds of comments and ideas.

While reviewing this feedback, it became evident that certain themes and causes were rising to the top of the community's priorities - issues like the walkability of downtown's streets, the quality of downtown open spaces, and the lack of street trees, for instance. These common themes, or takeaways, from the engagement process are detailed on the following page, framed as hurdles to success that this plan and its recommendations must strive to overcome.

These common themes became the foundation for the six big ideas for downtown, introduced and detailed in the following chapter. The ideas respond to what we heard during the plan's engagement, providing solutions and strategies to improve downtown and focus on its most pressing issues.

As noted in the introduction, the planning team has divided this action-oriented effort for downtown into two deliverables - a vision for downtown via this strategic master plan, and a streamlining of the downtown's decision process via consolidated Design Guidelines and Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) amendments. Similarly, the themes discussed in the engagement activities relate to both deliverables.

As a result, the solutions to these hurdles, or "problems" are best addressed through either this downtown strategic plan, or through consolidated Design Guidelines and subsequent UDO Amendments.



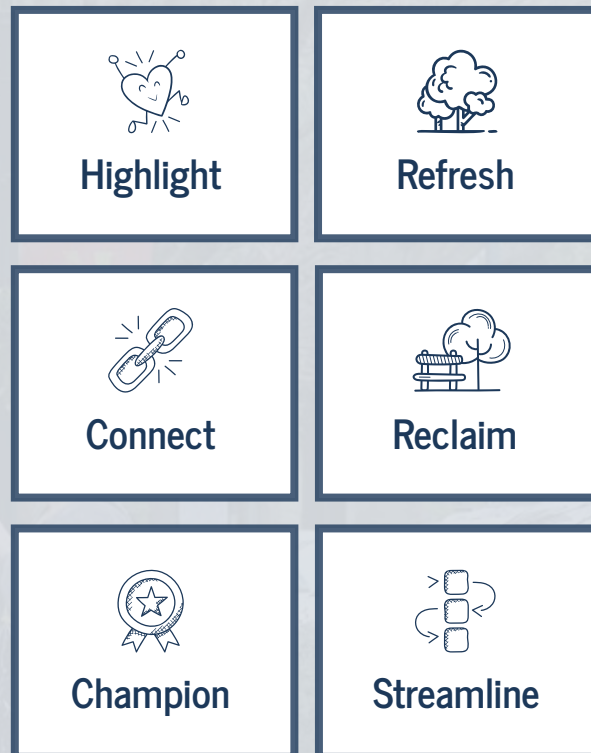
What problems are we solving?

Hurdles to Success from Community Engagement

- ▶ Broadening **Understanding and Support** for Great Places/ Great Downtown
- ▶ Opportunity for **Distinctive Brand/ Identity** of Downtown
- ▶ **Preserving and Strengthening** Unique Districts
- ▶ **Connecting** Assets Across a Large Downtown Geography
- ▶ **Improving Street-level Comfort, Safety, and Ambience**
- ▶ **Bridging Wide, Busy Streets** (Huger, Assembly)
- ▶ Dedicated **Stewardship of Public Open Space** and Green Space
- ▶ **Better Allocation of Right-of-Way** for Business and Public Use
- ▶ Urban Design **Expertise and Capacity of Planning & Zoning Staff**
- ▶ Urban Design **Expertise and Training of BoZA**
- ▶ Improving Street Level **Interest in Buildings**
- ▶ Mitigating Summer **Heat**
- ▶ Clarity of Entitlement **Process**
- ▶ Fixing Specific **Gaps and Loopholes** in Ordinances and Guidelines

Downtown Columbia Strategic Plan (This Document!)

Six Big Ideas for Downtown Columbia





Downtown Columbia

STRATEGIC PLAN & DESIGN GUIDELINES

04

**Six Big Ideas
for Downtown**

Introduction to the Big Ideas

The following six ideas for Downtown represent actionable solutions for Downtown's most pressing issues.

From the hundreds of comments, ideas, and activity results collected through the plan's engagement with the Columbia community, six initiatives emerged. They tackle core issues and opportunities highlighted by the community, from downtown's lack of walkable connections to its overly wide streets, to an opportunity for improved programming of public spaces. The six ideas, as introduced in this section, include:

- ▶ **Idea 1 | Highlight:** Create an urban trail and linear park that connects downtown's assets, institutions, and destinations.
- ▶ **Idea 2 | Refresh:** Create a more comfortable downtown environment through improved tree canopy and green space.
- ▶ **Idea 3 | Connect:** Focus on safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles at key intersections.
- ▶ **Idea 4 | Reclaim:** Reclaim right-of-way from excessively-wide streets for uses that support local businesses, residents and visitors.
- ▶ **Idea 5 | Champion:** Provide dedicated stewardship of downtown's unique places and resources through a consortium of invested private and public partners.
- ▶ **Idea 6 | Streamline:** Protect downtown's long-term economic competitiveness and real estate value by creating user and business-friendly design guidelines.

Each idea is supported by data and trends from peer cities across the country as well as specific comments, observations and sentiments from the public engagement process with the Columbia community. A prioritization section outlines key action items is included as a tool to support implementation.



1 | Highlight

Build an urban trail to connect and highlight the unique qualities and competitive strengths of Downtown Columbia



2 | Refresh

Create comfortable streets and public spaces that welcome visitors and support everyday living



3 | Connect

Short term **solutions for intersection safety** improvements along the major arterial streets in downtown



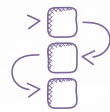
4 | Reclaim

Re-allocating right-of-way to strengthen business vitality and pedestrian safety



5 | Champion

Dedicated maintenance and programming of public open space



6 | Streamline

Update Design Guidelines to protect the long-term economic competitiveness and real estate value of downtown



Big Idea #1

Highlight





“Around the State House is more park-like. Green, pretty flowers and trees”

“Many businesses and restaurants but Gervais needs to be much more walkable. i.e. need to slow traffic down and beautify this corridor.”

Where do you take visitors from out of town? “State House and Trinity Church, USC Horseshoe, Main Street and the Vista, and the Canal walking trail”



Build an urban trail to connect and highlight the unique qualities and competitive strengths of Downtown Columbia.

To better link downtown's most popular destinations, which are disconnected and spread over a large geographic area, and to help strengthen the identity of downtown, a signature urban trail is envisioned for the heart of Columbia. The trail will offer a safe, accessible, low-stress route for local residents and employees, and provide a distinctive linear park experience for both locals and visitors.

With a boom in the value of trail-oriented development around the country, this presents an opportunity to attract and retain people and investment in Downtown Columbia.

The Capitol Loop and Vista Loop urban trails are primarily located on locally-owned streets, providing the most flexibility for streetscape enhancements and trail amenities that will encourage daily use. They are also aligned with downtown's major retail corridors, providing support to the restaurants, retailers, and businesses that rely on daily foot traffic.



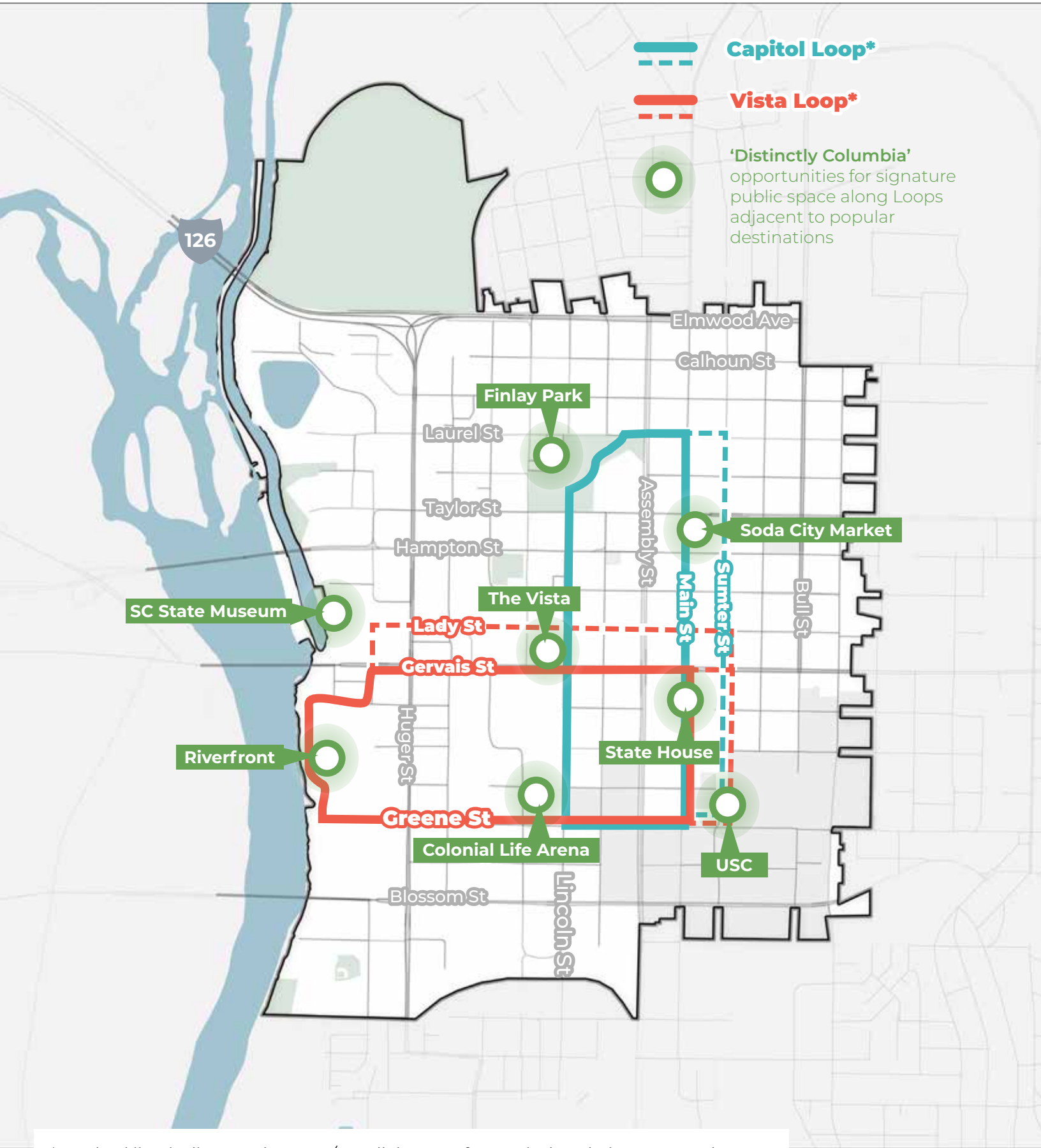
Potential segments of urban trail along Greene Street (top), Gervais Street (middle), and Main Street (bottom).

"The river front is a great place to walk. I like the unpaved side path. I wish the trail was longer"

"Down Main St - the architecture is varied and fantastic on all the buildings. I love the fairy lights that arch across the street."

"Main Street has a feeling of a walkable and lively city. The outdoor atmosphere is simply amazing!"

Potential Urban Trails



Capitol Loop*

Vista Loop*

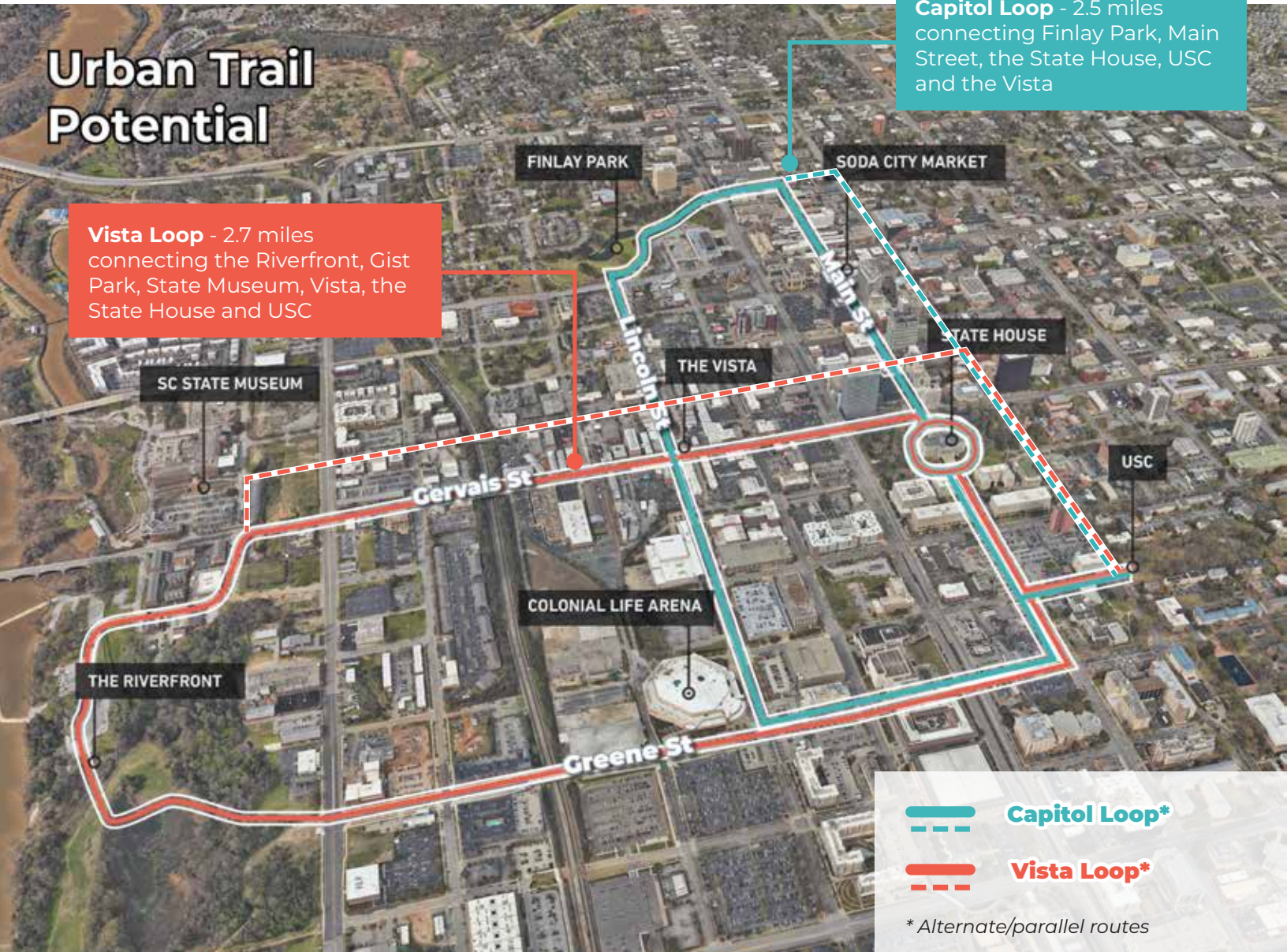
'Distinctly Columbia'
opportunities for signature public space along Loops adjacent to popular destinations

* Dashed line indicates alternate/parallel routes for Capital and Vista Loops along Sumter Street or Lady Street, to be determined by feasibility or funding availability.

Urban Trail Potential

Capitol Loop - 2.5 miles connecting Finlay Park, Main Street, the State House, USC and the Vista

Vista Loop - 2.7 miles connecting the Riverfront, Gist Park, State Museum, Vista, the State House and USC



These urban trail loops will be signature placemaking elements within the downtown core providing opportunities to **highlight the unique history and cultural resources of Columbia**. These elements can be highlighted through new wayfinding, signage, historical markers, and public art with lighting installations, murals, and sculptures. The nexus between trail and placemaking destination is one already explored by Columbia's peer downtowns, including the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, and Atlanta's Beltline Trail.



Atlanta's Art on the Beltline is one of the largest temporary public art exhibits and linear galleries in the country.

In addition, the loops will connect the most popular and highly valued destinations within downtown. By creating a marketing campaign - Distinctly Columbia - to accompany the physical assets of the trail, Columbia can

leverage and incorporate the Capitol Loop and Vista Loop into the greater economic development and visitor attraction strategies that aim strengthen Columbia's national profile and competitiveness.

Case Studies

Cultural Trail (Indianapolis, IN)



The trail uses excess right-of-way from wide city streets to connect the city's cultural districts to each other and improve pedestrian and bicyclist access throughout the city. Significant portions of the Cultural Trail were constructed in 90 ft right-of-way, which is smaller than almost all of DT Columbia's streets, making a great case study for what is possible.



Civic Center Drive (Columbus, OH)



A centerpiece in the Columbus Riverfront, Civic Center Drive was transformed from a four-lane car-centric corridor into the Scioto Mile — a mile-long promenade for pedestrian and cyclists. Currently a two-lane street, excess right-of-way from the roadway was re-allocated into landscaped gardens, seating areas, sculptures, street trees, and plaza spaces overlooking the Scioto River.

Supporting Data

Nationally, academic research shows that investments in the public realm increase our emotional attachment to our environments, improves quality of life, supports economic development, and helps increase surrounding property values. This research builds a strong foundation for making the case for the two trail loops in downtown.

“Our emotional attachment to place is stronger for places of distinct character.”

Scannell L. & Gifford R (2014)
The Psychology of Place Attachment

“While economic factors are used to eliminate infeasible regions...quality of life and place image determine the final selection.”

Dixit A., Clouse C., & Turken N. (2019) Strategic Business Location Decisions: Importance of Economic Factors and Place Image

“Investments in trails, bike lanes and bicycle sharing systems have high levels of return on investment. There is evidence of a correlation between access to trail facilities and increased property values.”

ULI Active Transportation and Real Estate: The Next Frontier

What we Heard



Open House
Community Input

At the Community Open House, we asked Columbia residents to tell us how they would use these two loops. As seen in the results, most responses focus on exploring downtown and its attractions.



Walk/Bike/Stroll to **work** **13%**



Grab a **bite or drink** **27%**



Contemplate and enjoy **nature or the river** **20%**



Exercise and **Recreate** **21%**



Visit **destinations/things to see** **17%**



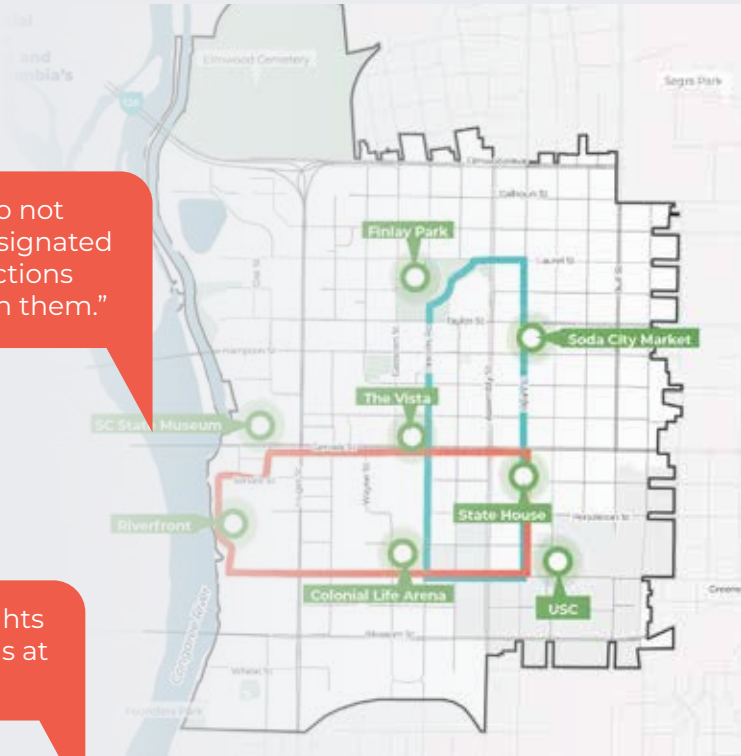
Other **3%** Places to see friends
Catch a USC Game
Walk pets

“Historic Columbia is a showpiece for our town. Please highlight it!”

“Many people visit our town and do not know how to interact with it - a designated loop could showcase the top attractions and engage people to interact with them.”

“I would like these trails as a way to entertain visitors and showcase Columbia”

“Colorful lights on buildings at night.”



Implementing the Capitol and Vista Loops

Based on the support from the community to connect landmarks and major shopping and dining corridors, the following recommendations guide the City towards implementation of the Capitol and Vista Loops. In many ways, this idea combines the concepts and recommendations of each of the other Big Ideas in this plan. For instance, the creation of these trails loops will likely require:

- ▶ Upgrading streetscapes by planting street trees (Big Idea 2: Refresh);
- ▶ Making safety improvements at intersections with trail crossings (Big Idea 3: Connect);
- ▶ Reallocating excess right-of-way to allow for expanded pedestrian and cyclist facilities (Big Idea 4: Realign);


- ▶ Mobilizing downtown leaders and partnerships for the creation and stewardship of the trails (Big Idea 5: Champion); and
- ▶ Working with private development to ensure that future buildings engage at street level with the loop trails (Big Idea 6: Streamline).

As such, the creation of these two loops may provide an avenue for the City to "test" other ideas in this plan through pilot programs or enable their early implementation. The timeframe for construction of segments of the Loop will be determined by the initial implementation steps outlined below.

The first step in the implementation of the Capitol and Vista Loops is the

funding of a concept pitch package to showcase the benefits of trails downtown, provide proof-of-concept through successes in peer communities, and generate excitement with compelling visualizations of the urban trails. Through the use of the Pitch Package, public, private, and institutional champions can be identified and organized to support a Feasibility Study. This Study will explore technical feasibility, project costs, and timelines that will enable fundraising, capital planning and phasing of the work.

Potential partners for the urban trail loops include but are not limited to Parks and Recreation, Economic Development, University of South Carolina (USC), Boyd Foundation, Cola Town Bike Collective, and Experience Columbia.

 Big Idea: Highlight			
	Recommendations	Timeline	Potential Partners
1	Fund Concept Pitch Package: Trail Benefits	Short-Term	City of Columbia, City Council
2	Cultivate Champions: Pair Public with Private Sector/Institutional Champions	Short-Term	USC, City Council, Cola Town Bike Collective, Experience Columbia
3	Fund Feasibility Study	Short-Term	City of Columbia, Boyd Foundation, Cola Town Bike Collective, Experience Columbia

Immediate: 0-1 year

Short-Term: 2-3 years

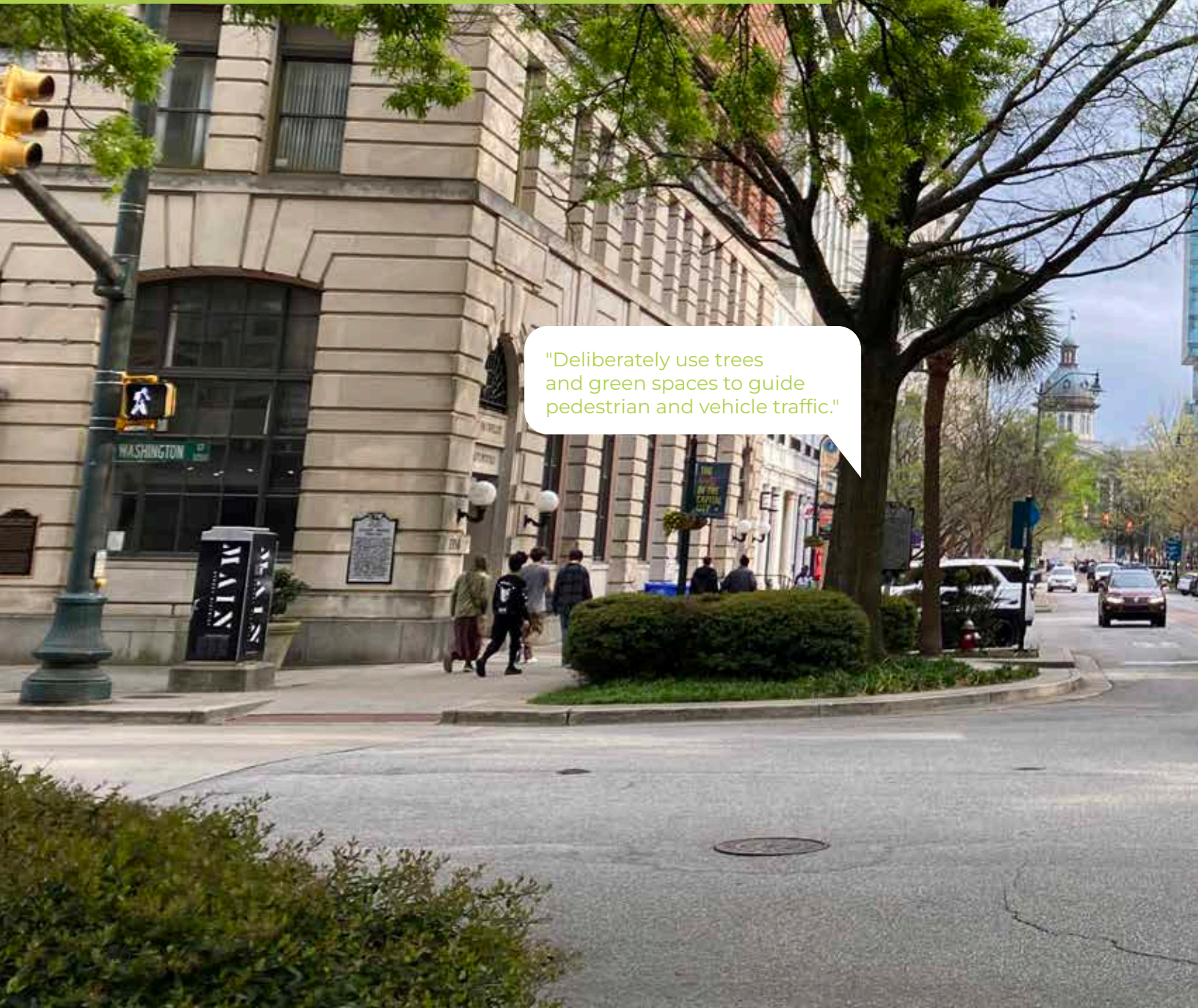
Mid-Term: 4-5 years

Big Idea #2



Refresh

"Deliberately use trees and green spaces to guide pedestrian and vehicle traffic."



A photograph of a city street scene. In the foreground, a black SUV is driving towards the camera. The street is lined with modern buildings, including a prominent one with a curved facade and large windows. There are several trees with green leaves, and a street lamp with a clock tower on top is visible on the right. The sky is blue with some clouds.

"Downtown has come a long way, but I still feel there is a lack of green spaces, and the downtown area as a whole still prioritizes cars."

"I would like to see more investment in green spaces and native landscaping that will cool the area and divert rainwater naturally."

"I drive my car everywhere, however, I will gladly trade street parking for green space, trees, parking garages, and pedestrian only areas."



Create comfortable streets and public spaces that welcome visitors and support everyday living.

To keep the local community and visitors to Columbia cool, safe, and healthy in public spaces, an increase in the urban tree canopy must be a priority.

The presence of shade trees in downtown can provide a wide range of substantial benefits:

- ▶ Support retail and restaurant business performance
- ▶ Improve property value
- ▶ Decrease heat on summer days and improve safety for outdoor workers and pedestrians
- ▶ Reduce traffic speed through natural traffic calming effects
- ▶ Minimize cooling load and energy costs in buildings
- ▶ Reduce air pollution

- ▶ Absorbs stormwater (reducing flooding and sewer loads)
- ▶ Provides wildlife habitat
- ▶ Encourages walking and cycling (to reduce traffic congestion)

Given the significant amount of publicly-owned land in Downtown Columbia, strategies for tree preservation and increased tree planting must be modeled on public land and championed by government entities, beginning with the City. Policies, ordinances, operational/maintenance resources, and capital investment must reflect the status of urban tree canopy as part of the critical infrastructure of the City.



Street trees in Downtown Columbia

Supporting Data

The societal case for additional trees and vegetation in cities is well documented. Trees are known to increase property values, help mitigate heat, and support a more walkable environment.

Commercial Properties are Worth More! Commercial properties with substantial mature tree cover have a price increase of 18%

Wolf, K.L. City Trees and Property Values (2007). https://www.naturewithin.info/Policy/Hedonics_Citations.pdf

Summer Heat is not as Deadly! "Mature shade trees can reduce a daytime thermal heat load by more than 40 degrees Fahrenheit in urban areas"

Kantor et al. The Impact of Façade Orientation and Woody Vegetation on Summertime Heat Stress Patterns in a Central European Square: Comparison of Radiation Measurements and Simulations (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1155/2018/2650642>

Publicly-Owned Space in Downtown (including Right-of-Way) & Tree Canopy

Online Survey Result: Street trees are top ranked for what makes a great downtown street.

Highest ranked

Street trees providing cooling shade for pedestrians

Second highest ranked

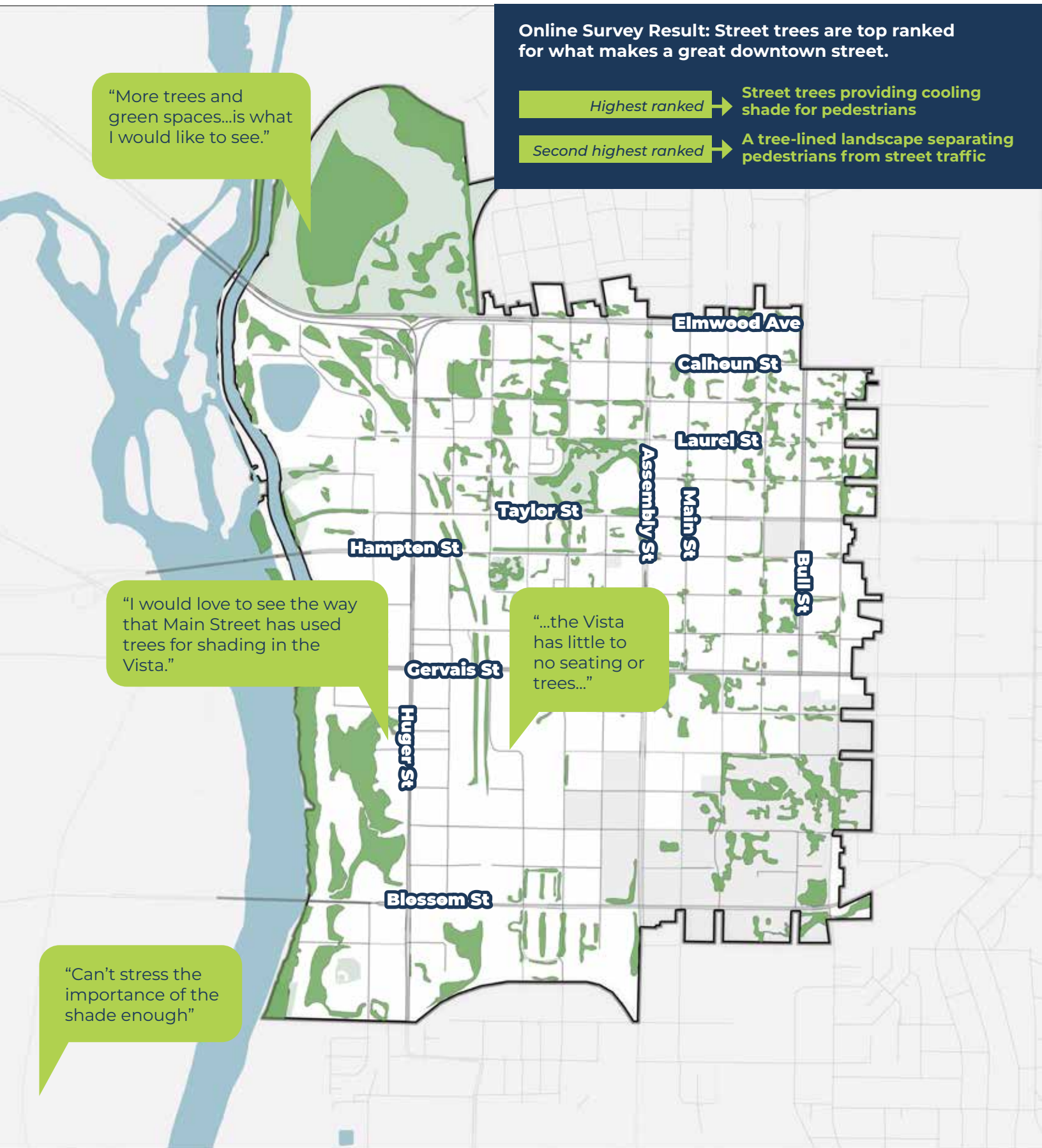
A tree-lined landscape separating pedestrians from street traffic

"More trees and green spaces...is what I would like to see."

"I would love to see the way that Main Street has used trees for shading in the Vista."

"...the Vista has little to no seating or trees..."

"Can't stress the importance of the shade enough"



What We Heard



Open House
Community Input

If you were the City's Urban Forester... Where would you plant more trees?
Using the green pins provided, pick 3 spots in Downtown Columbia that could benefit from more trees. Tell us why using a post-it!

Tree Suggested

"Trees in popular pedestrian areas to help protect/have a barrier between pedestrians and traffic"

More trees needed in Finlay Park and along other major streets"

"Trees are great but we could also stop mowing and "rewild" many unused areas to increase biodiversity."

"Sumter St, N of Gervais seems like a prime place for street diet and more trees."

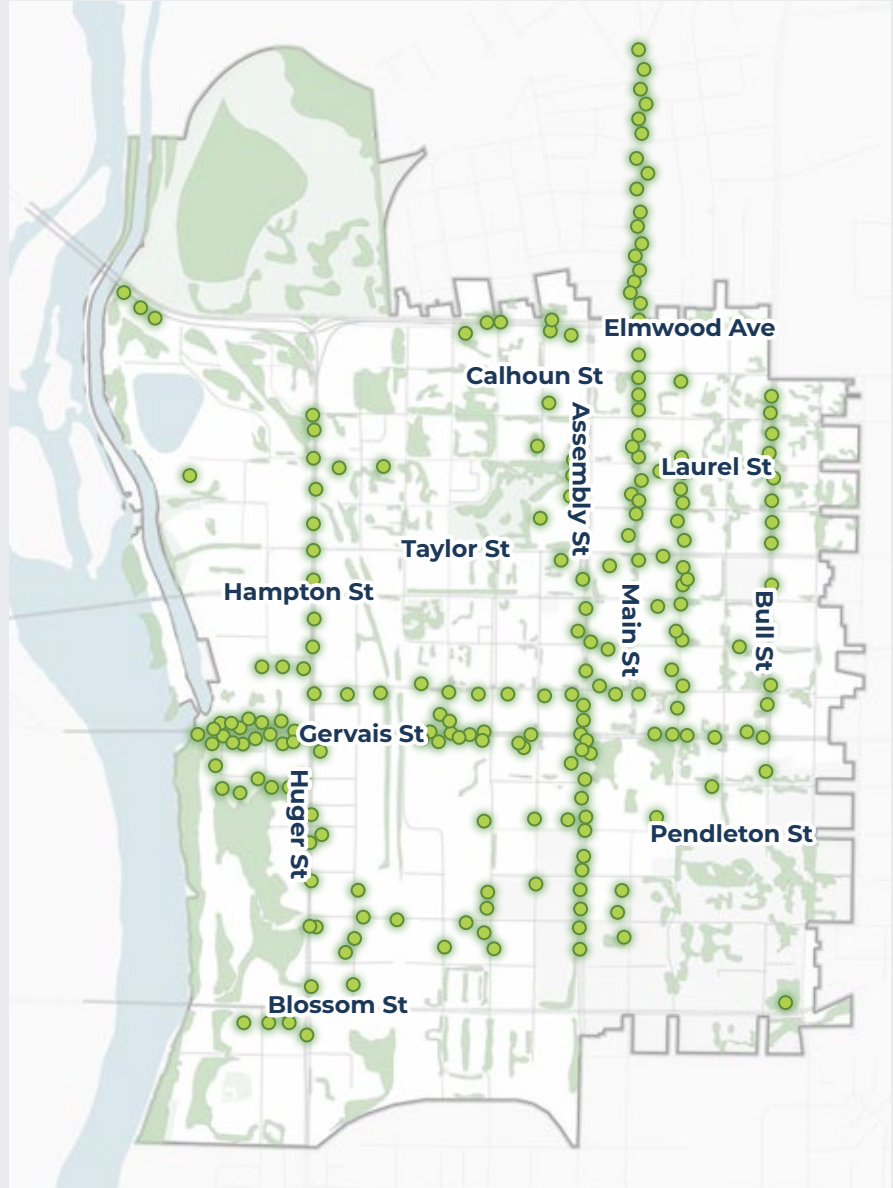


Photo of Open House public input on preferred tree locations.

Implementing an Urban Tree Canopy

To refresh the built environment in Downtown Columbia with greater tree canopy cover, the City must lead the way with policy and creative funding mechanisms. The first priority is the establishment of a City target for tree canopy coverage that informs any capital work on public streets and public spaces. Parallel to this effort, and incorporating the coverage targets, a Council-endorsed Urban Tree Canopy Plan should be developed

that showcases the benefits of urban trees and serves as a catalyst for engaging with owners of state, federal and private land in downtown.

Lastly, incremental improvements in tree cover should be advanced through each private development in downtown, especially street tree planting. The identification of a revenue stream (e.g., payments in lieu of taxes, or PILOT, assessment) that can provide modest levels of funding for the planting

of street trees using best practices for maximizing soil volume will complement the canopy coverage efforts on publicly-owned land and capital projects.

 Big Idea: Refresh			
	Recommendations	Timeline	Potential Partners
1	Adopt City Policy for tree canopy coverage goals on City-owned land and streets	Short-Term	Forestry, Parks & Recreation, Planning
2	Develop policy document for resolution of Council support that addresses the benefit of the urban tree canopy	Short-Term	Forestry, Parks & Recreation, Planning, Economic Development
3	Identify revenue stream for urban street tree planting that is contributed toward private development downtown	Short-Term	Forestry, Planning, Economic Development
4	Revise SCDOT landscape restrictions to allow for the planting of shade trees Downtown	Short-Term	SCDOT

Immediate: 0-1 year

Short-Term: 2-3 years

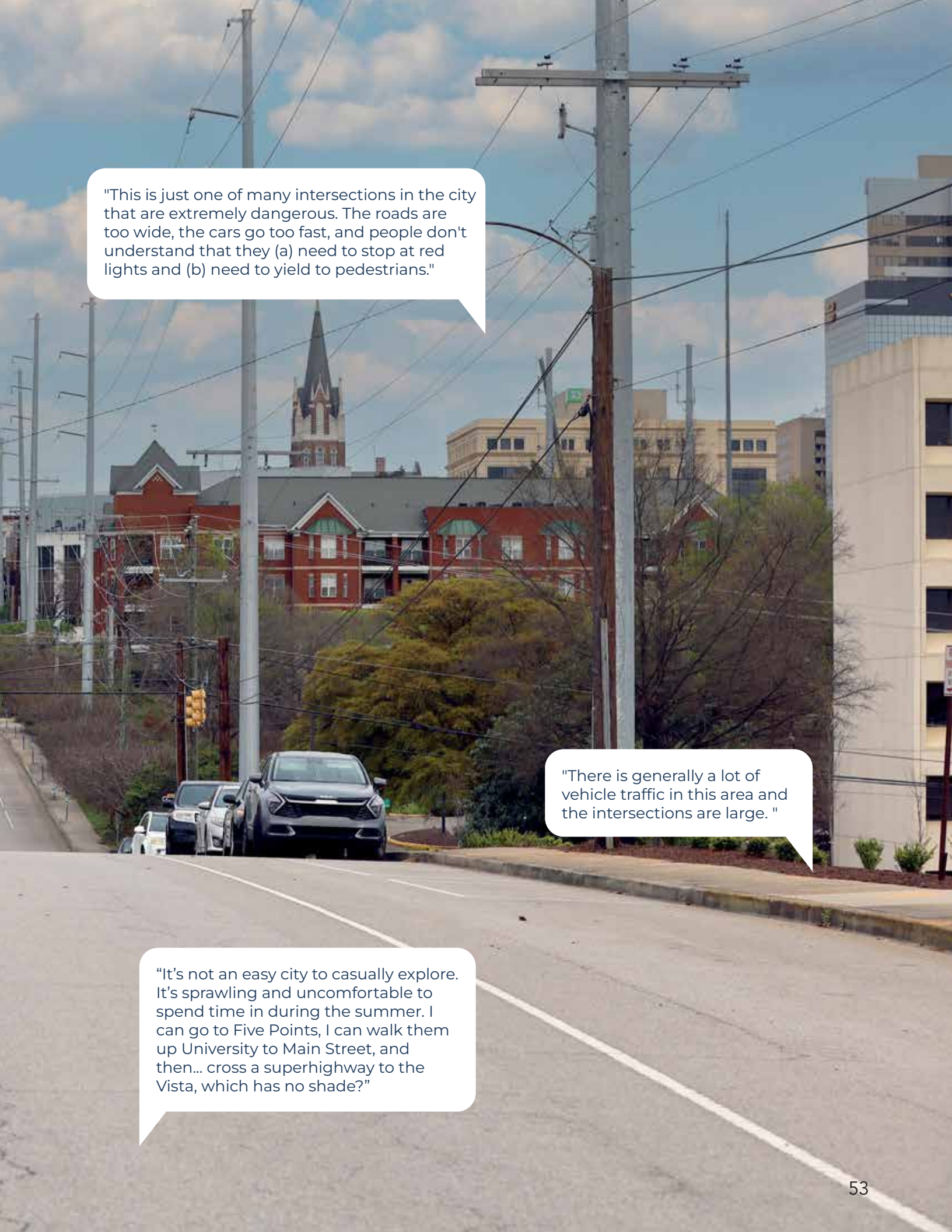
Mid-Term: 4-5 years

Big Idea #3



Connect

"No white stripes in crosswalk. No time to get across. If you want people to walk to the river you need to fix this. Other cities take large intersections like this and train the cars to look for pedestrians. Try walking this one day and you will see that you need your head on a swivel, to avoid getting hit."



"This is just one of many intersections in the city that are extremely dangerous. The roads are too wide, the cars go too fast, and people don't understand that they (a) need to stop at red lights and (b) need to yield to pedestrians."

"There is generally a lot of vehicle traffic in this area and the intersections are large. "

"It's not an easy city to casually explore. It's sprawling and uncomfortable to spend time in during the summer. I can go to Five Points, I can walk them up University to Main Street, and then... cross a superhighway to the Vista, which has no shade?"

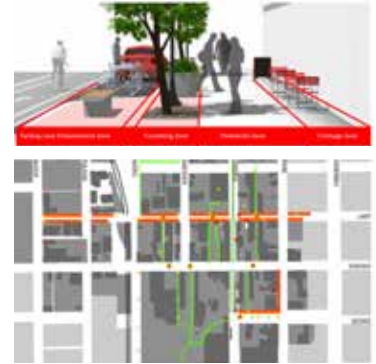


Short term solutions for intersection safety improvements along the major arterial streets in Downtown.

In recent years, intersection safety has been a major component of federal and state strategies for reducing traffic-related injuries and fatalities. Intersections create points of conflict for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians and represent 1/4 of all traffic fatalities and 1/2 of all traffic-related injuries nationwide.

In Downtown Columbia, major arterials such as Huger, Elmwood, and Assembly serve as barriers to pedestrian movement. The perceived and real risks of crossing wide, multi-lane streets with high speed vehicles effectively compartmentalizes areas of downtown, negating many of the agglomeration benefits that businesses and residents derive from their downtown location.

To fix broken links in the network of downtown streets and sidewalks, this initiative aligns the *West Gervais District Plan*, *Walk Bike Columbia*, and this ongoing Downtown Strategic Plan with City and State capital improvement plans to ensure that safety improvements at major arterial streets are prioritized for near-term implementation.



Recommendations from *West Gervais District Plan* (2017)

There have been 7,575 vehicular incidents in downtown in the 5-year period between 2017-2021.

Over half (51%) of all accidents have occurred on three state routes:

- Huger Street
- Assembly Street
- Gervais Street

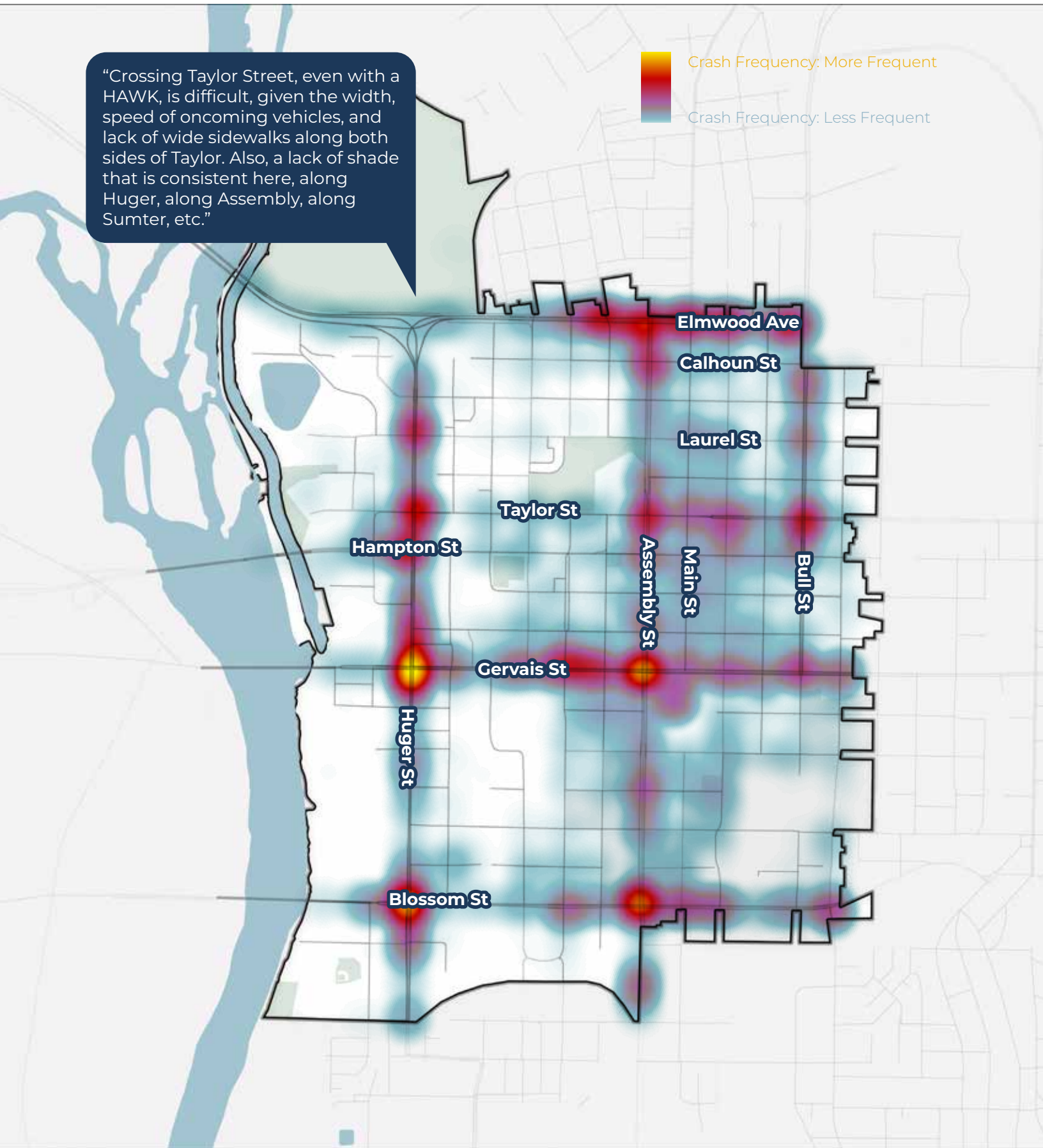
“I walk there a lot & there’s sidewalks on both sides and walk signs at all the intersections”

“I work on main st and my wife works at the capitol so we take advantage of the capitol grounds to go on walks during our breaks. There is lots of green space and shade, very little car traffic, and it’s safe clean and open.”

“This is an area that is built for cars to move quickly. Huger especially is geared toward getting people up to 126”

Vehicular Incidents 2017 - 2021 (Data Source: SCDOT)

“Crossing Taylor Street, even with a HAWK, is difficult, given the width, speed of oncoming vehicles, and lack of wide sidewalks along both sides of Taylor. Also, a lack of shade that is consistent here, along Huger, along Assembly, along Sumter, etc.”

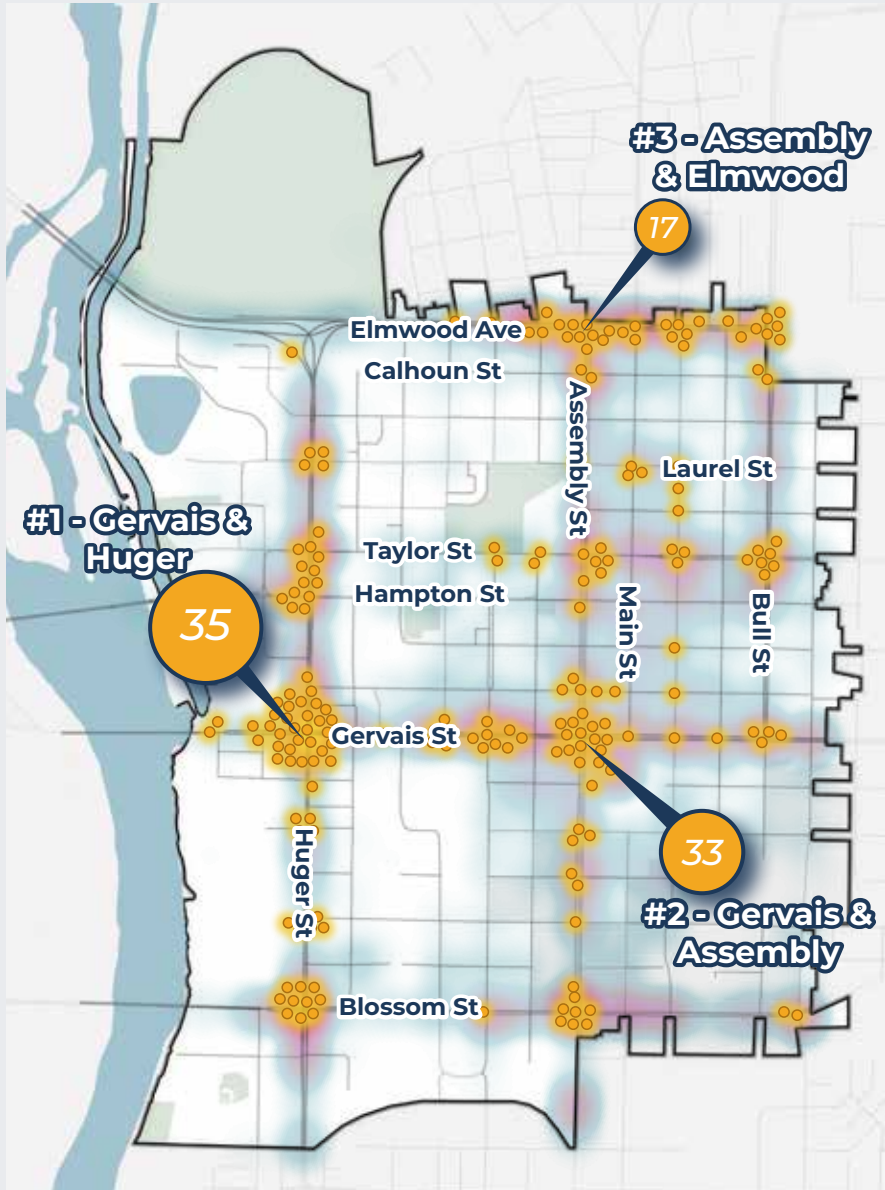


What We Heard



Open House
Community Input

If you were a Traffic Engineer... Which 3 intersections should we prioritize when considering safety improvements for pedestrians and cyclists? Use the blue pins to show us on the map, and tell us why using a post-it!



“Convert lanes on Assembly and Gervais to Pedestrian and Bike trails that are protected.”

“Built for a ‘get commuters to suburbs’ mentality of the 1960’s that has destroyed downtown.”

“As I walk downtown, there are too often walk signals that do not work. Dangerous!”

“Enforce Speed Limits!”

“Use traffic calming curbs which encroach on driving lanes to force awareness.”

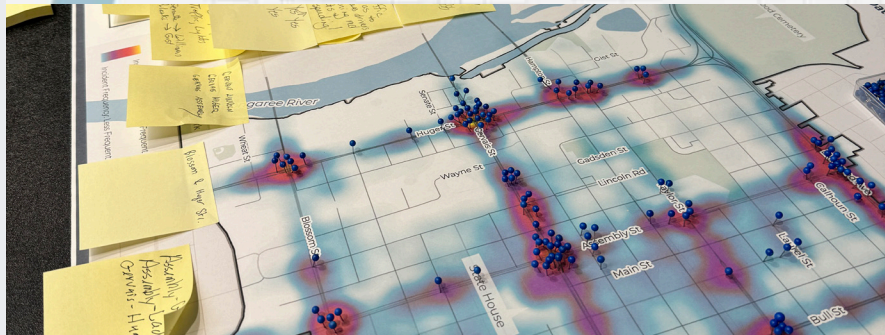



Photo of Open House public input on intersections that take priority.

Implementing Safe Connections

Safe connections in Downtown are a shared responsibility for those invested in the City of Columbia and requires a closely coordinated effort between the City of Columbia and SCDOT. Starting with a joint meeting between City Traffic and SCDOT District 1 to affirm the results of crash data and public input regarding priorities for intersection safety, a Downtown Intersection Safety Feasibility Study should be initiated to inform State and City capital project lists

and provide the foundation for near-term implementation of intersection improvements along the primary state-owned Downtown arterials.

 Big Idea: Connect			
	Recommendations	Timeline	Potential Partners
1	Engage with City Engineering and SCDOT District 1 to review and affirm public priority locations for crossing/safety concerns	Mid-Term	SCDOT, Traffic Engineering, Cola Town Bike Collective
2	Downtown Intersection Safety Feasibility Study	Mid-Term	SCDOT, Traffic Engineering, Cola Town Bike Collective

Immediate: 0-1 year

Short-Term: 2-3 years

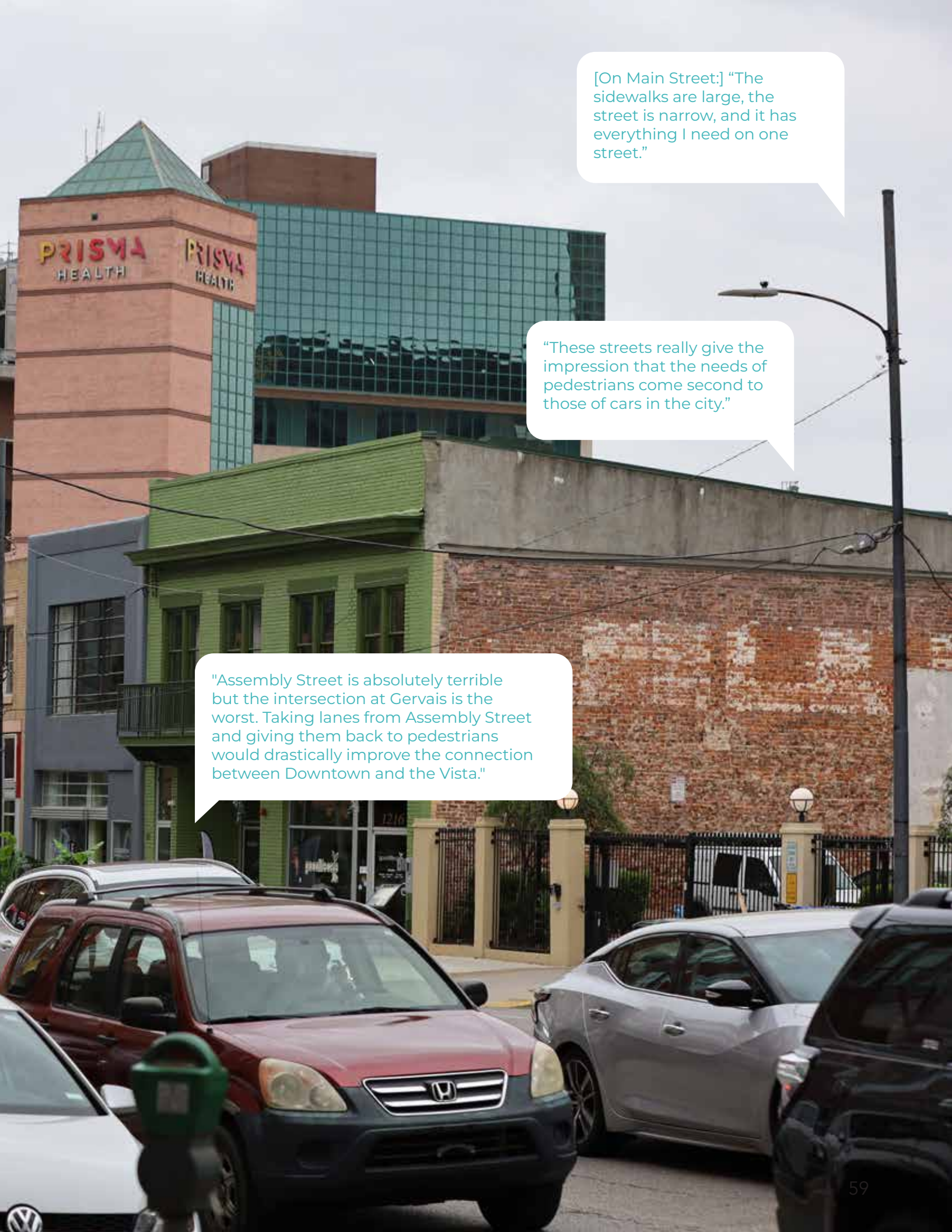
Mid-Term: 4-5 years

Big Idea #4



Reclaim

"We are severely lacking on walkability"



[On Main Street:] "The sidewalks are large, the street is narrow, and it has everything I need on one street."

"These streets really give the impression that the needs of pedestrians come second to those of cars in the city."

"Assembly Street is absolutely terrible but the intersection at Gervais is the worst. Taking lanes from Assembly Street and giving them back to pedestrians would drastically improve the connection between Downtown and the Vista."



Re-allocating right-of-way to strengthen business vitality and pedestrian safety.

The wide streets of Downtown Columbia have vastly more space dedicated for vehicular travel lanes than is required by engineering standards. This inefficient use of land results in several conditions that limit the success of local businesses and that limits the attractiveness of downtown to potential residents and visitors.

The re-allocation of right-of-way, or “road diet,” is a policy-based initiative that has been acknowledged by the FHWA and other transportation authorities for well over a decade as a proven safety countermeasure that benefits all users. A re-allocation of right-of-way that reduces excessive vehicular lanes could result in the following benefits:

- ▶ **Safer streets:** Lower traffic speeds and reduced crossing distance resulting in measurable safety improvements and lower potential for crash severity.
- ▶ **More space for businesses:** Recapture of valuable real estate for outdoor dining, retailing, and amenities that generate revenue for downtown businesses.
- ▶ **Higher property values:** Greater business vitality, reduced level of traffic stress for all users, and available space for property-enhancing features such as street trees.



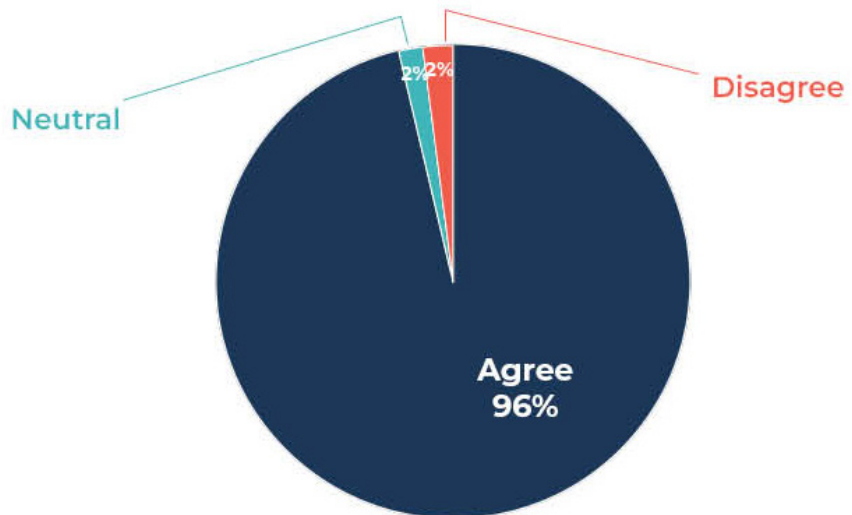
Public Market on Assembly Street



96% of Columbia respondents agree that great public spaces are important for downtown!

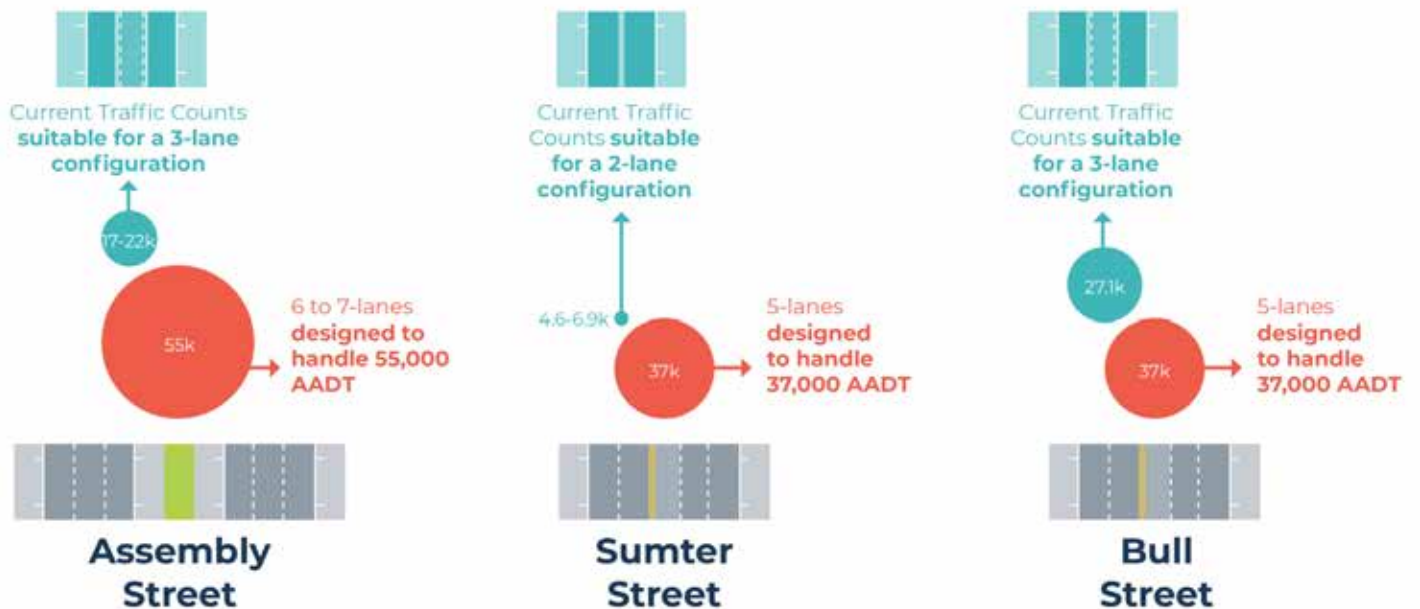
To recapture downtown public space for people and businesses, the City of Columbia must lead with a demonstration of broad public support for this approach to safer, more efficient and more beneficial use of City-owned public right-of-way. This support can then translate into the appropriate public policy, engineering standards, and design guidance that inform the (re)construction of City streets.

Based on successful public and local political support, along with sound engineering best practices, the State-owned streets within Downtown Columbia may be considered for this important initiative.



96% of Columbia respondents agree that great public spaces are important for downtown!

Columbia Streets Are Over Engineered

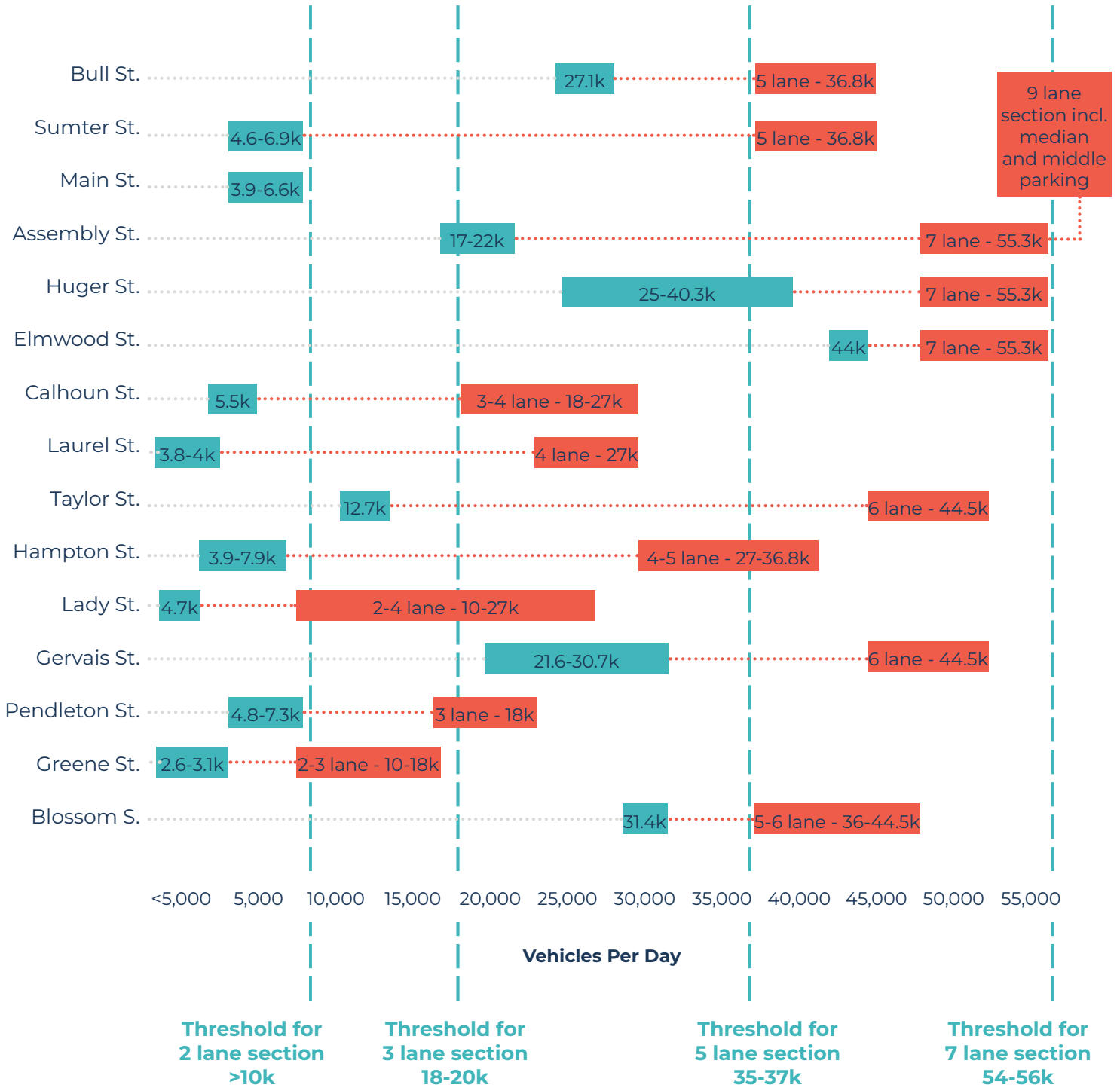


- Actual traffic count
- Existing street design

Assembly, Sumter and Bull Streets are a few examples of how over-engineered downtown streets are, providing excessive lanes and pavement widths that cause high speeds and lack safety for bikers and pedestrians.

Downtown Streets are Too Wide

Overall, Downtown Columbia's streets have excessive lanes and pavement widths that cause high speeds and lack safety for bikers and pedestrians. The chart below compares street design with their actual traffic counts.



Actual traffic count Existing street design

Supporting Data

Right-sizing streets in urban areas is both business-friendly and beneficial for overall safety. Roadways designed for cars to quickly speed in and out of a downtown district often fail to generate lively pedestrian activity, resulting in poor pedestrian foot traffic to support businesses along these corridors. The case for road diets is well documented across the country, with supporting data showing proven benefits for both businesses, drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists.

Outdoor dining increases business! “Restaurants that added outdoor dining spaces as a result of the pandemic saw a 30% increase in total sales between 2019 and 2022”

Rossmore. Dining or Parking? Managing the Curb During COVID-19 and Beyond: An Analysis of the L.A. Al Fresco Program (2023). <https://doi.org/10.17610/T61024>

Increasing property values and safety! “Road Diets can provide an overall crash reductions of 19-47%, while also increasing property values and allowing ‘leftover’ roadway width to be repurposed for other uses.”

Road Diet Information Guide - FHWA Safety Program (2014). www.safety.fhwa.dot.gov



LA's Al Fresco Program added parklets for outdoor dining during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The program's popularity led to its permanent implementation.

Local Case Study: Greene Street and Lincoln Street



Improvements to the intersection at Lincoln and Greene Street prioritize safety for bikers and people walking. Narrow car lanes and updated landscaping with shade trees will make walking more comfortable for students and visitors.

What we Heard



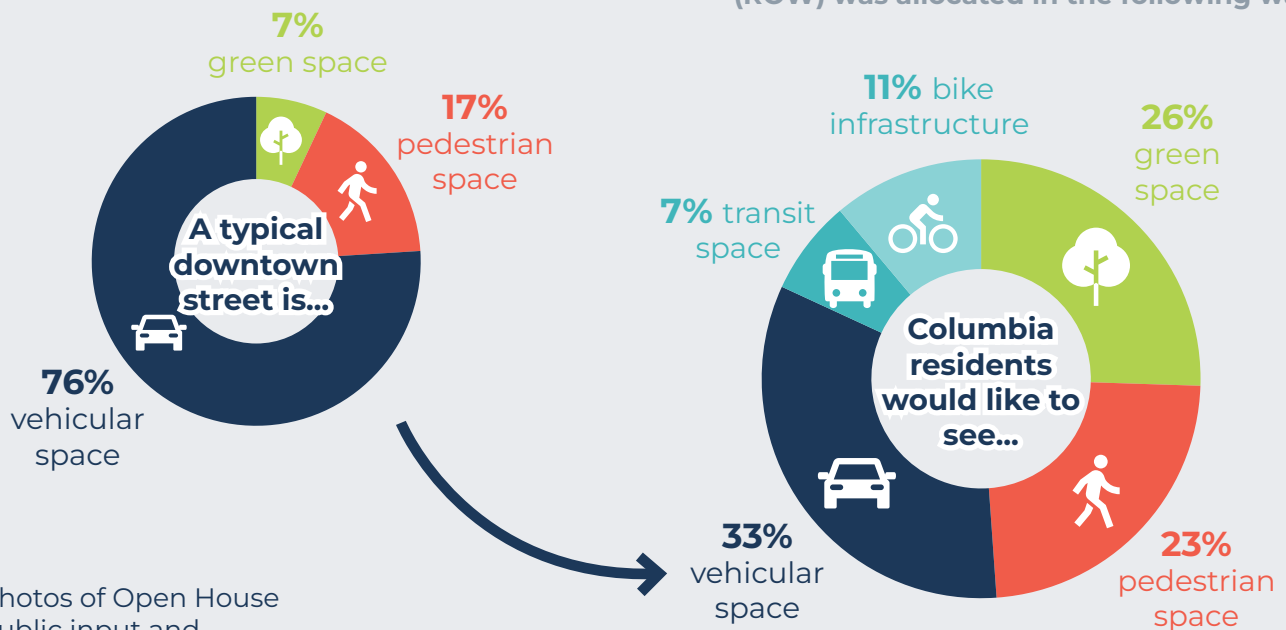
Open House
Community Input

Using the kit of parts provided, design your ideal downtown street within this 100-foot dimension.

53
Streets designed by
open house attendees



In these 53 designs, the 100-foot Right-of-Way (ROW) was allocated in the following way:



Photos of Open House public input and participants.



87%
of participants
included
pedestrian space




75%
of participants
included bike
infrastructure

Implementing an Active and Safe Public Realm

The re-allocation of right-of-way in the streets of Downtown Columbia from vehicular lanes to uses that better support businesses, residents and pedestrian traffic is a long-term initiative with tremendous transformative impact.

The implementation of this effort must start with action on three fronts:

- 1. Enact City policy updates** requiring any road re-construction project on City-owned streets to be scoped for the study of capacity and lane reduction.
- 2. Adopt (and re-affirm at appropriate intervals) a resolution of support from City Council for road diets** on downtown streets, entitling SCDOT to rely on local community support for re-allocation of right-of-way on state-owned road diet projects downtown.
- 3. Identify funding sources** (e.g. Hospitality Tax, allocation of County penny tax renewal) to support cost of one-time expenditures on pedestrian facilities and streetscape amenities as part of road diet projects.

 Big Idea: Reclaim			
	Recommendations	Timeline	Potential Partners
1	Enact City policy updates requiring any road re-construction project on City-owned streets to be scoped for the study of capacity and lane reduction.	Mid-Term	City of Columbia
2	Adopt (and re-affirm at appropriate intervals) a resolution of support from City Council for road diets on downtown streets.	Mid-Term	City of Columbia
3	Identify funding sources (e.g. Hospitality Tax, allocation of County penny tax renewal) to support cost of one-time expenditures on pedestrian facilities and streetscape amenities as part of road diet projects.	Mid-Term	City of Columbia

Immediate: 0-1 year

Short-Term: 2-3 years

Mid-Term: 4-5 years



Big Idea #5

Champion

“Use of sidewalk space on Main Street since COVID has improved street life”





“Recommend pausing on all new public spaces managed by the City until current ones have been restored (Memorial Park, Finlay Park, and Vista/ downtown area sidewalks in neighborhoods)”

[On why Main Street is enjoyable]: “Because other locations downtown have been overlooked and yet to be kept up. If more emphasis was placed on other areas I would enjoy other locations more.”



Dedicated maintenance and programming of public open spaces to ensure that Downtown remains clean and safe.

Downtown is a unique geography within the City of Columbia and plays a significant role in the economic, cultural and social life of the City. As such, its success is everyone's success. Downtown's heightened importance for the region is evident for the following reasons:

- ▶ **High Visibility & Visitorship:** Downtown hosts a substantial concentration of visitors and is a large part of the brand and identity of greater Columbia
- ▶ **Business & Employee Density:** Downtown has a critical mass of both small business and large employers
- ▶ **Tax Base & Fiscal Impact:** The value of downtown property and the result of economic activity downtown is a driver

of fiscal resources and a key part of the local and regional economic development strategy

- ▶ **Cultural & Historic Resources:** Downtown Columbia is home to a wealth of cultural and historic resources which, in addition to their inherent value, form the core of civic pride and community identity while making significant contributions to the local economy.
- ▶ **State Capital & Flagship University:** The industries of state government and public education are towering institutions within Downtown Columbia with state, national, and international significance.



"Finlay Park has the most potential to be a jewel in the city with the views and event opportunities."

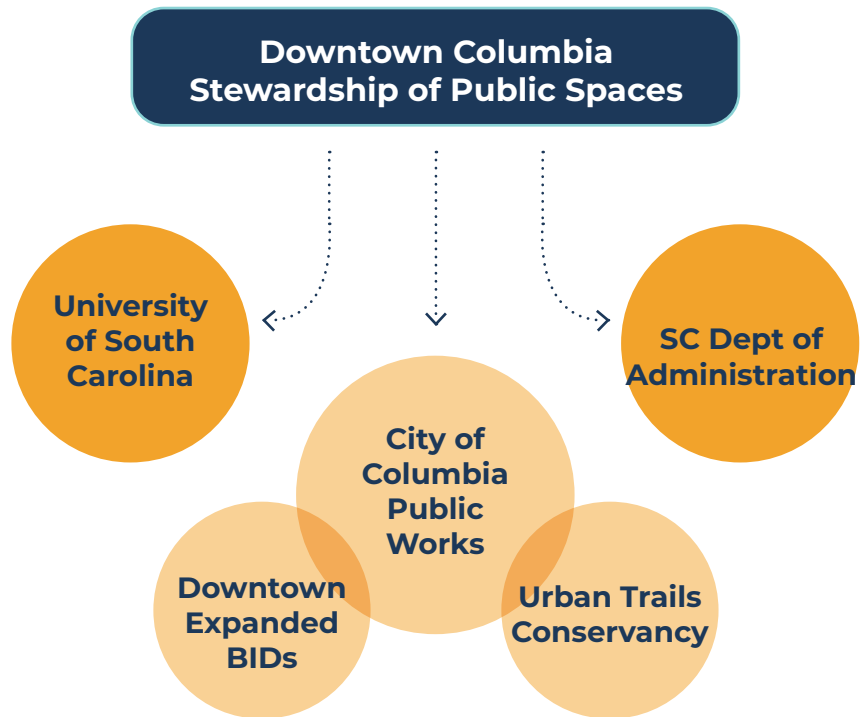
"I go downtown when there are events and I'm with my friends."

Downtown Public Spaces Roles & Responsibilities

Given these singular qualities, their importance to the Columbia community, the unique burden of stewardship associated with them, and the complexity of the built environment and ownership downtown, a **dedicated management entity is required**. Such an organization would be able to facilitate, build, and sustain the public-private partnerships necessary to guide and realize the community's goals for:

- ▶ Clean, safe, and welcoming public spaces
- ▶ Dedicated marketing and branding
- ▶ Programming, activation, and community events
- ▶ Business support
- ▶ Public safety and social services support

This dedicated stewardship of downtown can be accomplished through the **creation of a new Downtown consortium**. This new permanent standing group of government departments and non-profit organizations can be responsible for Downtown's ongoing priorities. From overseeing coordination for special events, to supporting programming that attracts the entire Columbia community, this consortium can include the following key members with vested interests in downtown. These may include SCDOT, the University of South Carolina, State Department of Administration, City of Columbia, Main Street Business Improvement District (BID), a future Vista BID (in formation), and a potential future Capitol Loop Conservancy. The latter is a potential new organization to guide the development and foster the maintenance



and programming of a new Capitol Loop and Vista Loop as described in the first big idea in this plan, Highlight.

These organizations and their involvement are illustrated in the graphic above.

Supporting Data

A dedicated management agency is a popular and effective tool for downtowns and special districts across the country. Understanding that downtowns and urban districts have special needs, there is a wide library of examples, including:

Facts about Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)

- There are over 400 BIDs functioning in 42 states in the US.
- Studies have shown that on average, the value of commercial property within a BID increases by approximately 15 percentage

points more than comparable properties in the same neighborhood but outside the BID.

• BIDs are rarely if ever disbanded, showing that property owners realize real value from BID services.

More Open Spaces Downtown!

"Privately owned public spaces, also known by the acronym POPS, are spaces dedicated to public use and enjoyment and which are owned and maintained by private property owners, in exchange for bonus floor area or waivers... POPS provide a myriad of opportunities to sit, relax, people watch, eat, meet others – in other words, to partake and enjoy in urban life in one of the world's greatest cities."

New York City's Privately Owned Public Spaces, NYC Planning - <https://www.nyc.gov/site/planning/plans/pops/pops.page>

What We Heard



102

Total comments provided by the community at the Open House

How can we rally folks to support Downtown? What are some organizations, groups that could champion these big ideas? Tell us with a post-it!



27
Community organizations suggested, including:

- ▶ Cola Town Bike Collective
- ▶ One Columbia
- ▶ Columbia Opportunity Resource (COR)
- ▶ Experience Columbia

17
Potential/existing events to build excitement, such as:

- ▶ Running clubs
- ▶ Parking Day
- ▶ Nighttime events
- ▶ Weekday Farmer's Market
- ▶ Educational and Family-Friendly

50
Transportation and parking-related comments, such as:

- ▶ Make parking garages feel safer with lighting and signage
- ▶ Improve downtown parking experience
- ▶ Street closures for events
- ▶ Slow down traffic

"Organizations: Experience Columbia, Main Street District, Vista District, COR, MBLG, USC"

"Need more ways to activate the Main St area such as "parking day" and other events."

Implementing Downtown Champions

The Downtown Consortium that will be responsible for the stewardship of the 965 acres of downtown public space will focus on safety, maintenance, programming, event planning, capital project coordination and other public realm priorities.

Potential partners can include but are not limited to the City of Columbia, SC Department of Administration, SCDOT, USC, Main Street District, The Vista BID, and the proposed Capitol Loop Conservancy.

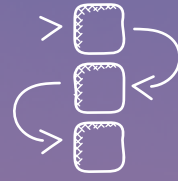
 Big Idea: Champion			
	Recommendations	Timeline	Potential Partners
1	Compose and convene a permanent standing group of government and non-profit organizations responsible for Downtown Columbia	Immediate	City of Columbia, SC Department of Administration, SCDOT, USC, Main Street District, The Vista BID, Capitol Loop Conservancy

Immediate: 0-1 year

Short-Term: 2-3 years

Mid-Term: 4-5 years

Big Idea #6



Streamline

“Need more infill remove surface lots except where need to support retail/office. May need to consider more garages with ground floor retail or attached to hotels/multifamily developments”



“More emphasis on true mixed-use development of live, work, and play for all ages will result in a vibrant, year-round economy versus one focused solely on when students are in session.”

“Design standards protect everyone and create a community.”

“There is no Ordinance in place that prevents landowners from bringing underground utilities back into the air. There are also no incentives for parking lots to increase canopy contributing to the heat island effect.”



Update Design Guidelines to Protect the Long-Term Economic Competitiveness and Real Estate Value of Downtown

As the business and civic heart of the region, Downtown Columbia requires special consideration and investment. Downtown's buildings and its signature spaces help define Columbia to both the region and the entire state. As the capital of the state, Downtown Columbia needs development and growth to match its heightened importance and visibility, while sustaining Columbia's reputation as a business-friendly place to build.

Through this plan's engagement, the Columbia community recognized the importance of high quality design to create a livable and successful downtown. While many of those engaged welcomed new residential growth in downtown and identified it as pivotal to its economic competitiveness, a prominent theme emerged about recent development's lack of contextual sensitivity

and overall blandness in its design. Of those engaged, more than 2 in 3 responses support an increase awareness in how building design, and their relationship to their surroundings, impact downtown.

This plan thus recommends the creation of Design Guidelines to shape how future buildings and public spaces relate to the downtown realm. These guidelines have various benefits, such as:

- ▶ Protecting the unique character and assets of downtown.
- ▶ Creating a consistent, high-quality downtown street-level experience.
- ▶ Supplementing zoning controls by creating more sensitivity to context.
- ▶ Providing clarity in the entitlement process for downtown developers.
- ▶ Serving as clear criteria for design review.



"Design has overall kept with the vibe. Restoration of historic buildings is great."

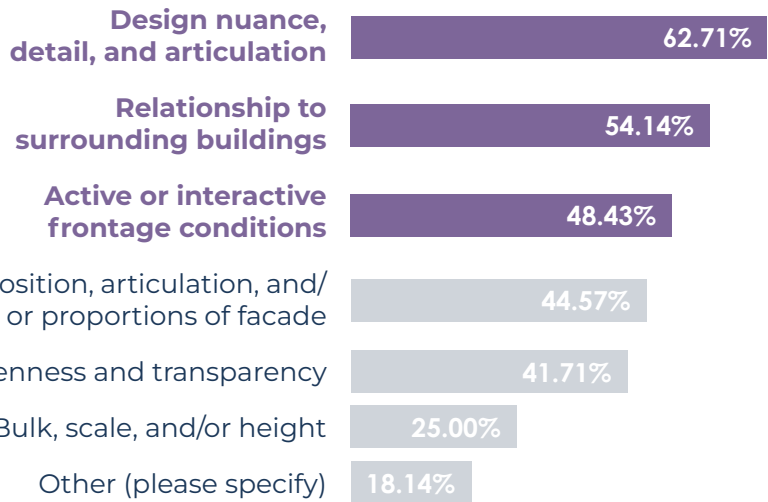
" Yes, there have been significant improvements in the design of Downtown Columbia. A gap remains in regards to accessibility. It seems to be an exception rather than a practice."

"We need better street and business design."

62%

of survey respondents agree that recent development and building design in downtown has contributed to Downtown Columbia's sense of place and enhanced its street life

Online Survey Results: What are methods in which buildings could best contribute to Downtown Columbia's sense of place and enhance its street life?



Supporting Data

The case for safe, well-designed, walkable streets goes beyond the realm of good urban design. A well-designed public realm has proven economic and real estate benefits for its surroundings.

Safe Streets Attract Patrons! "Brooklyn's Vanderbilt Avenue saw a doubling in retail sales in the three years following installation of bicycle lanes and a tree-lined median, significantly outperforming borough-wide and city-wide trends"

The Economic Value of Sustainable Streets. New York City Department of Transportation. <https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/dot-economic-benefits-of-sustainable-streets.pdf>

Tenants Want Quality Architecture! "Buildings that have received architectural awards command rental premiums as high as 23% more than the market for comparable buildings"

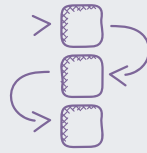
Hough & Kratz (1983) Can "good" architecture meet the market test? [https://doi.org/10.1016/0094-1190\(83\)90028-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0094-1190(83)90028-1)

Workers Want Quality Workplaces! "77% of executives view quality of office environment as and indicator of management's respect for employees, and 85% of executives say the office environment is a major contributing factor to their employees morale and motivation." Urban Land Europe, 2003 p15

"Being in an area that, on average, is reported as distinctive as opposed to neither distinctive nor non-distinctive area increases property value by as much as 18.6%." Ahlfeldt, Gabriel M. and Holman, Nancy (2017). [Distinctively different: a new approach to valuing architectural amenities. The Economic Journal ISSN 0013-0133](#)



What We Heard



188
Total comments
provided by the
community at the
Open House

Using a post-it, tell us what you like/dislike about the following downtown streets.

Gervais Street



- ▶ **LIKE:** Sidewalks are in good shape, landscaped medians are nice.
- ▶ **DISLIKE:** Traffic is too fast, speed limits are not enforced, the roadway is too wide, could use more trees and pedestrian space, and feels car-centric.

Lady Street



- ▶ **LIKE:** Sidewalks and plantings are in good shape, feels walkable
- ▶ **DISLIKE:** Could use more seating areas, has too many parking lots facing the street.

Sumter Street



- ▶ **LIKE:** Has potential, convenient to cut-through to Taylor Street parking.
- ▶ **DISLIKE:** Very car dependant with wide lanes, lacks street trees, needs bike lanes, buildings feel inactive and not engaging the street level.

Main Street



- ▶ **LIKE:** Amount of activity, nightlife, historic buildings, walkability, and density.
- ▶ **DISLIKE:** Needs to be even more pedestrian-friendly, have more active ground level spaces, and include bike paths.

Taylor Street



- ▶ **LIKE:** Street trees and parking.
- ▶ **DISLIKE:** Needs bike lanes, seating, and better connectivity to Downtown.

Greene Street




- ▶ **LIKE:** It feels welcoming, green, and the bike lanes are great. The bridge is great!
- ▶ **DISLIKE:** Trees are not providing enough shade, could use better connectivity with the riverfront.

Implementing Design Guidelines

The Innovista and City Center Design Guidelines require an update and as an effort to implement the Downtown Columbia vision for the built environment from this Strategic Plan streamlining the updated Design Guidelines will help achieve the goals of the community. Combining the two districts to have a comprehensive and unified downtown will create a connected, revived, and simplified process for the development community.

To accomplish these recommendations the City will need to revise the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) to address pedestrian and downtown sign standards, update the process and procedures for design approval as outlined in the UDO, and address land uses permitted Downtown.

 Big Idea: Streamline			
	Recommendations	Timeline	Potential Partners
1	Create unified Design Guidelines for downtown to apply toward the current City Center District and Innovista District boundaries, and amend the City's zoning map to reflect this updated boundary.	Immediate	City Council
2	Revise the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) to address pedestrian/downtown sign standards in downtown, such as materiality and placement.	Immediate	City Council
3	Revise the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) to streamline DDRC review process and its procedures.	Immediate	City Council
4	Update the UDO to better calibrate land uses permitted or limited within the downtown boundary.	Immediate	City Council
5	Introduce separate Urban Design & Historic Design panels to the DDRC board to offer clarity between differing and overlapping sets of reviewing criteria.	Immediate	City Council

Immediate: 0-1 year

Short-Term: 2-3 years

Mid-Term: 4-5 years

From Big Ideas to Reality

The implementation of the six big ideas will require a dedicated focus on Downtown's public realm.

Downtown Columbia is a unique and special district in the region. Home to cultural destinations, the State's administration, and the University of South Carolina, its impact extends well beyond the City. As such, its success is reflective of the region and of concern to a variety of stakeholders.

Each of the six big ideas have key initiatives that will strengthen downtown and help make it a more successful district. As evident from the feedback collected at the Community Open House and the second round of Mobile Workshops, shown in the following page, the ideas have overwhelming community support. This second round of mobile workshops occurred in September 2024 and included meetings with the Columbia Tree and Appearance Committee (CTAC), Commercial Real Estate Women (CREW) luncheon,

Main Street District combined committees, and Mayor's Collegiate Engagement Council.

From designing two trail loops to connect downtown destinations to right-sizing streets, Columbia residents expressed a desire to make downtown more walkable, less car-dependant, and more dynamic for visitors and residents. Through an

interactive activity where community members were asked to "vote" for the prioritization of the six ideas using 10 chips, it is clear that there is strong support for building the two loop trails, increasing downtown's tree canopy, and redesigning streets with a "road diet" to reclaim right-of-way space for pedestrians and cyclists.



What We Heard: Prioritization

Using 10 chips tell us which of the six ideas are most important to you. Place the poker chips in the jar in front of the Big Ideas you would like to spend your chips on.

Input from 188 participants through the Open House and second round of Mobile Workshops

01



Highlight

Build an urban trail to connect and highlight the unique qualities and competitive strengths of Downtown Columbia

384 Chips

20.4%

02



Refresh

Create comfortable streets and public spaces that welcome visitors and support everyday living

405 Chips

21.6%

03



Connect

Short term solutions for intersection safety improvements along the major arterial streets in Downtown

308 Chips

16.4%

04



Reclaim

Re-allocating right-of-way to strengthen business vitality and pedestrian safety

373 Chips

19.9%

05



Champion

Dedicated maintenance and programming of public open space

190 Chips

10.1%

06



Streamline

Update Design Guidelines to protect the long-term economic competitiveness and real estate value of Downtown

219 Chips

11.7%

