

COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

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'Aggressive' downtown plan has bold agenda

Business First of Columbus - by [Brian R. Ball](#)

The city of Columbus has adopted a new planning document to guide downtown economic development and investment for the next decade or more. But after years of extensive municipal spending on roads, parks and parking garages, investment to keep improving downtown – as has been the case in the past – likely will need buy-in from the private sector.

The Downtown Columbus Strategic Plan adopted by **Columbus City Council** July 19 supports the concept of additional housing on city-owned property near COSI as well as privately held land along Topiary Park which sits just east of the main library.

Improved transit circulation and a streetcar system connecting downtown with **Ohio State University** also are called for in the plan.

Councilman Andy Ginther welcomed the plan because the daily presence of more than 100,000 workers makes the city's center the economic engine of the region. The city gets more than 20 percent of its income taxes from downtown employers.

“It's absolutely critical,” he said, “that our downtown plan is aggressive and ambitious.”

'Making it better'

The vision plan marks a follow-up to the city's 2002 plan that spurred residential development and focused on city incentive programs to encourage office leasing.

Media

The city, through its nonprofit **Columbus Downtown Development Corp.** affiliate, has worked with the **MSI Design** planning and landscape architectural firm since late 2006 to develop the plans. The process for the new one included community forums to gain comment and suggestions from the public.

“We had a charge to analyze downtown, develop some principles and evaluate future growth opportunities,” said MSI principal Keith Myers. “Through the examination of that, we had ideas we thought could become catalytic.”

For example, to make downtown an attractive place for commuters as well as residents, the plan promotes creation of parks and arts-oriented public space. It also envisions centers where downtown workers and residents can store and rent bicycles.

Stephen Wittmann, a developer and chairman of the city’s Downtown Commission, called the recent planning effort “a combination of vision and pragmatism.”

“What I like is we’re taking things that we have, like the riverfront, and making it better,” said Wittmann of the **Wittmann Co.** downtown.

MSI planners hope the city takes their recommendation to remove low-head dams on the Scioto River downtown, allowing for more water flow so flora can get re-established on the banks.

Wittmann said that could build on the Scioto Mile park project the city has under construction.

“If we take out the dams out and make it a natural area,” he said, “we’ve added something and improved it.”

Wittmann and Ginther voiced support for a bus transit center to eliminate the long lines of COTA buses that form at High and Broad streets, especially during peak commuter times.

“It would have to be something a block or two off High,” said Ginther, whose committee responsibilities include economic development.

Spreading the cost

Ginther also supports the idea of a sports fieldhouse near the **Greater Columbus Convention Center** to play off the city’s robust business in youth sports tournaments. A facility at Nationwide Boulevard and North Fourth Street, he said, would free up the convention center for an event that runs concurrently with a sports tournament.



The downtown plan suggests removing dams from the Scioto River to increase water flow, which would allow it to be narrower – such as in the rendering above. With more of its natural habitat intact, a green river corridor would be created.

Ideas

1. Southwest downtown gateway area including Children’s Hospital, Grant Hospital and Franklin University presents an opportunity for office and residential development.
2. Create infill housing around Topiary Park on Town Street.
3. Develop a “creative campus” by building off recent expansion at Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus State Community College and Columbus Museum of Art, including streetscapes, mixed-use infill and a parking garage.
4. Redefine Broad Street including streetscape improvements and reducing its eight lanes.
5. Restore High Street including reducing bus congestion that blocks storefronts and prevents on-street parking.
6. Develop a downtown transit center to replace the High Street bus loop.
7. Create a multi-modal station at the Greater Columbus Convention Center that would include access to rail systems and act as a hub for commuter rail.
8. Create a downtown bicycle station that includes storage, lockers and showers for commuters.
9. Develop a downtown field house at the convention center to attract more sporting events.
10. Build a pedestrian bridge across the Scioto River to connect the Arena District to COSI.
11. Continue developing the Scioto Peninsula including a new science and nature park on the riverfront side of COSI and developing vacant ground with residential, office and research uses.
12. Scioto-Olentzky Greenway Corridor: Clean up rivers to make them usable for recreation and restore ecosystems by removing low-head dams that unnaturally widen rivers and impede flow, inhibiting habitats. The result would be a green river corridor that runs through the heart of downtown.

“It adds to our capacity to host a national high school volleyball tournament at the same time as a floral trade show,” he said.

Wittmann also supports the plan’s call for a fieldhouse, especially in light of the new hotel now under construction on North High Street just south of Vine Street.

“This is a town that is sports crazy,” he said.

The fieldhouse would be a facility designed especially for sports, and would be an upgrade over current facilities that were designed for trade shows and other business events, according to the report.

Dan Williamson, a spokesman for Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman, said city officials will sort through the proposed projects to set their priority.

Some of the immediate projects could include the bike centers and a pedestrian bridge connecting the Arena District to the so-called Scioto Peninsula on the west bank of the Scioto.

The bike center, Ginther said, “is something that we could knock out in short order.”

But other projects, such as commercial and residential development on the west bank of the Scioto near COSI, will need interest from private-sector developers.

“That hasn’t been identified as one (project) that’s ripe,” Williamson said, “both for funding and partners.”





Strategies

- 1. Urban form:** Establish minimum density, height and design standards for downtown development.
- 2. Transit:** Improve infrastructure and expand mobility options for alternatives to car travel.
- 3. Parking:** Develop a plan to enhance transportation, build garages and improve management of garages and on-street parking.
- 4. Parks/green space:** Increase the amount and connectivity of urban green space downtown.
- 5. Streetscape:** Create hierarchical street network that facilitates multiple modes of transportation.
- 6. Sustainability:** Establish downtown as the green capital of the Midwest.
- 7. Arts:** Invest in arts and cultural institutions and venues.
- 8. Connections:** Connect uses, districts and people.

The 2010 Downtown Columbus Strategic Plan can be accessed at www.downtowncolumbus.com/plan

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