



Neighborhood Revitalization Plan for the

Union Park Special Investment District

DRAFT
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Prepared for the
City of Des Moines
by czbLLC

Acknowledgements

Content under development

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Introduction

When it officially opened in 1896 as one of the city's four original parks, Union Park was located between Des Moines and the northern streetcar suburbs the city had recently annexed. On a scenic bend of the Des Moines River and away from the noise and pollution of stockyards, tanneries, and railroads, the park offered tranquility and escape to residents of the rapidly growing community. And it sent a powerful message about the young city's eagerness to invest in great public works that would last generations.

Over the following two decades, the park became the focal point for a new neighborhood. Homes in Period Revival and Arts & Crafts styles were built—larger ones on lots closest to the park and smaller ones elsewhere—as were numerous churches. For the families that moved to these tidy new streets, they offered levels of privacy and quality of life that were hard to match at the time for working families—and all on the doorstep of a great riverside park.

The Union Park neighborhood continued in this mode for much of the 20th century. But gradually, as older city neighborhoods became less competitive with newer city and suburban offerings, disinvestment in Union Park's infrastructure and housing accumulated. Year after year, pride of place and ownership became less visible. A walk on any given block by the 2000s offered fewer and fewer signs that people felt good about—and were actively investing in—the neighborhood's future.



A new energy, however, is at work today. Investments in Union Park and adjacent Birdland Park are rekindling their status as destinations. An active neighborhood association presides over a growing list of events and activities that bring people together. And Union Park stands out as one of Des Moines' more demographically diverse neighborhoods, with a large and growing contingent of family households.

This plan provides a focused framework for harnessing this new energy to recapture the Union Park neighborhood's status as a destination and a place noteworthy for its opportunities and pride.

Vision Overview

The vision for the Union Park neighborhood at the heart of this plan expresses the assets that residents cherish the most, the issues that need to be prioritized, and the outcomes that describe success.

Neighborhood residents, city officials, and everyone involved with plan implementation will know that progress is being made if the components of this vision ring truer with each passing year.

In 2035, the Union Park neighborhood is a place where...

We have preserved, strengthened, and leveraged our assets



Excellent parks and recreational attractions

Homes with historic charm on tree-lined streets

Family-friendly atmosphere and sense of community

Affordable options for first-time homebuyers

Close to downtown and other major Des Moines assets

We have made progress addressing our challenging issues and have built strong collaborations in doing so



Poorly maintained and vacant properties on many blocks

Few neighborhood-oriented businesses or services

Many streets, alleys, and sidewalks in poor condition

Disorderly behavior and speeding or noisy traffic make some areas feel unsafe

By building on our assets and doing so in a way that helps to mitigate our challenges, we have achieved outcomes that are important to us



Parks and amenities are true destinations

Streets and alleys are safe and clean; they show that people care

Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families

Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities

And we have made our neighborhood a true reflection of our vision.



Union Park neighbors are active people who have outdoor fun and relaxation at our doorsteps, whether it's a stroll down a tree-lined street, walking the dog through Union Park, taking the kids to the carousel and rocket slide, cycling along the river, or hanging out with friends at the marina. We even use our doorsteps to have a good time—listening to music with neighbors during PorchFest, or sitting with family and enjoying the fresh air.

Families are welcome and plentiful in Union Park, taking advantage of the quiet streets, yards, and parks to let kids be kids. And they find our housing both charming and accessible—with starter homes and move-up homes alike featuring historic touches and durability that make setting down roots here affordable and a good bargain.



Union Park

Planning Process Overview

This **Neighborhood Revitalization Plan for the Union Park Special Investment District** is part of a planning process that began in 2017, when the City of Des Moines undertook an evaluation of its Neighborhood Revitalization Program. The evaluation included a comprehensive look at housing conditions and market dynamics throughout Des Moines in order to understand the impact of previous revitalization work and emerging needs.



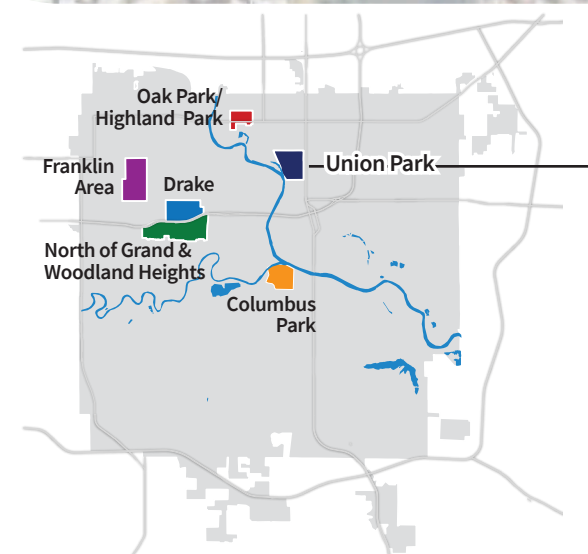
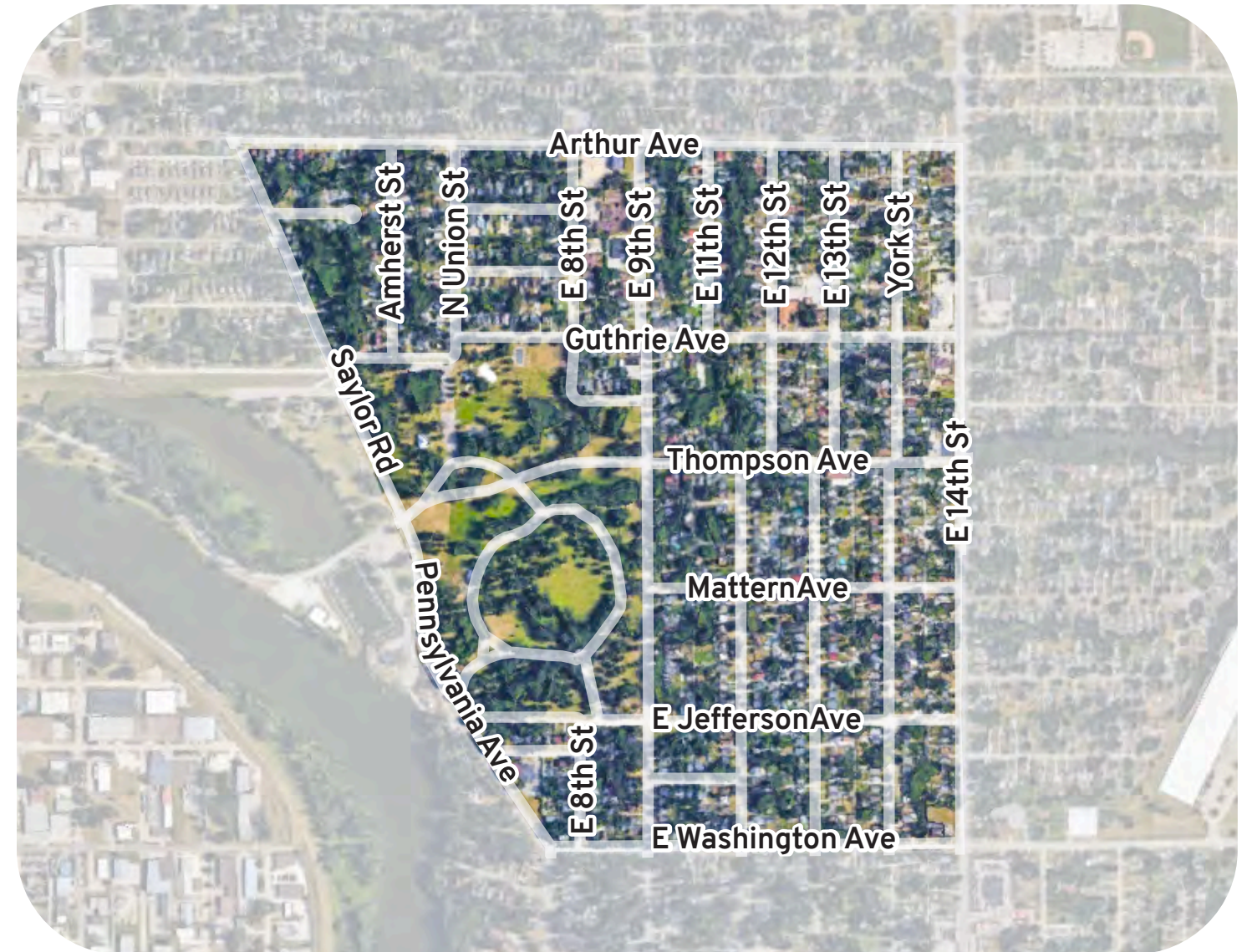
The evaluation found that neighborhood engagement and the cultivation of active neighborhood associations had been a key and noteworthy accomplishment. It also found, however, that only a small number of neighborhoods in Des Moines were genuinely strong and that most neighborhoods were somewhere between strong and distressed. This large and vulnerable “middle” was identified as needing special attention from future revitalization work.

To jumpstart this work, the City of Des Moines identified four **Special Investment Districts (SIDs)** to serve as pilot areas for policies and resources specifically designed for middle neighborhoods: Oak Park/Highland Park, Columbus Park, Drake, and the Franklin Area. Plans for these four original SIDs were adopted in 2019 and influenced the creation of **Invest DSM** in 2020—a non-profit funded by joint commitments from the City of Des Moines and Polk County to implement key aspects of the SID plans.



In 2024, the City of Des Moines decided to expand this work by adding SIDs to Union Park and the North of Grand & Woodland Heights neighborhoods. Areas within the SID boundaries are eligible to participate in programs offered by Invest DSM and may also receive prioritized attention for activities and investments overseen by the City of Des Moines and other implementation partners.

This plan was developed between June 2024 and February 2025 by the City of Des Moines and Invest DSM in partnership with a steering committee of neighborhood residents, with additional information drawn from a public survey, two open house events, and conversations convened by steering committee members. It provides guidance for a **10-year planning horizon within the SID.**



The initial boundaries of this Special Investment District cover a portion of the wider Union Park neighborhood. As in other SIDs, the potential for boundary changes will be considered on a yearly basis.

Des Moines Planning Context

Planning for Des Moines’ Special Investment Districts is part of a much broader set of planning efforts that aim to advance goals and policy direction set by the Des Moines City Council.

The general umbrella for planning in Des Moines is the comprehensive plan—**Plan DSM**—which was adopted in 2016 and will be updated in 2025/2026. *Plan DSM* provides overarching guidance for development regulations in the city, sub-area plans for neighborhoods and corridors, infrastructure master plans, long-range capital improvement plans, and annual strategic planning.

Two elements of Plan DSM with the most direct relevance to neighborhood planning are “Community Character and Neighborhoods” and “Housing,” which informed changes to Des Moines Neighborhood Revitalization Program in 2018/2019 and the subsequent development of Special Investment District Plans (including this one).

While the **enhanced focus on “middle neighborhoods”** represented by the Special Investment District planning and investment efforts has been an important pivot to the city’s approach to neighborhood revitalization over the past decade, it is **by no means the only work being done to improve conditions in Des Moines neighborhoods**. Every year the City of Des Moines allocates millions of federal housing and community development dollars in high-poverty Census Tracts according to a regularly updated Consolidated Plan.

The City of Des Moines has also committed local resources in recent years to assist housing improvements throughout the city, including the ION (Improving Our Neighborhood) program to assist income-eligible homeowners with emergency repairs and a Block Challenge program to assist groups of collaborating property owners with exterior improvements.

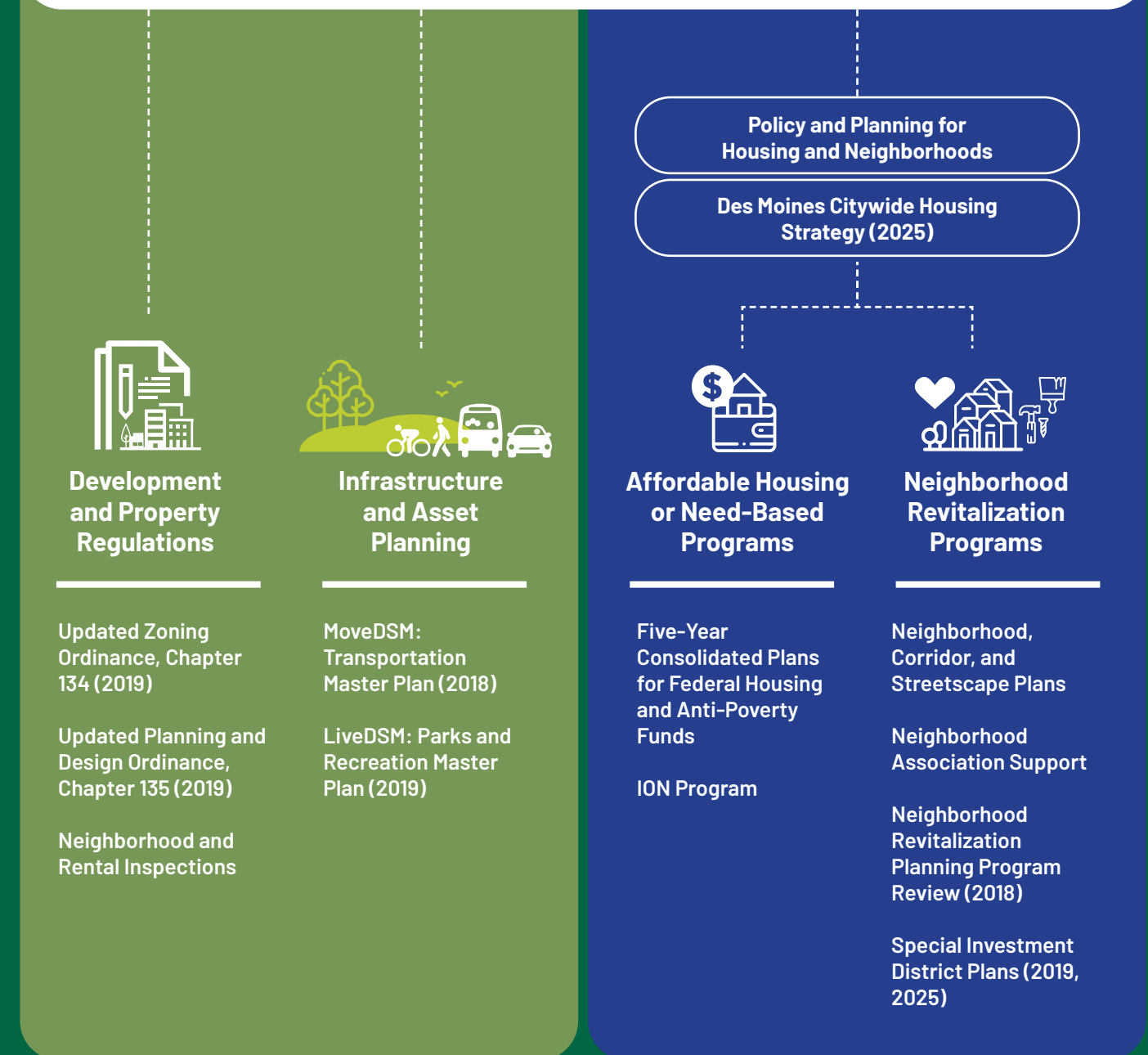


PLAN DSM

A long-range citywide plan that guides planning and decision-making in Des Moines. It has numerous elements, including “Community Character and Neighborhoods” and “Housing.”

More detailed plans and policies, guided by Plan DSM, have been put in place or modified since 2016.

Notable among these are:



Des Moines Planning Context

Since the adoption of Des Moines' first Special Investment District plans in 2019, and the creation of Invest DSM to help implement those plans in 2020, a wide-ranging work has been undertaken in the four original SIDs to support middle neighborhood reinvestment. Indeed, Des Moines has few if any counterparts in the United States that have pursued this type of work at a similar scale.

For example:



Over 1,300 individual projects have been completed, with 93% of them involving existing homeowners



\$14.3 million granted by Invest DSM has resulted in \$76.8 million in total investment; in other words, \$4.37 of private investment has been leveraged for every \$1 committed by Invest DSM



2024 represented a 37% rise in investment compared to 2023, reflecting a rapid increase in participation

These promising signs from the first five years of Des Moines' new approach to neighborhood revitalization will continue to the extent that the City of Des Moines and Polk County remain committed to the strategy. As the Status Report on Neighborhood Revitalization Efforts, 2018-2023 found, these investments appear to be having their intended effects, especially in the Drake and Franklin Area SIDs. But patience is required to continue the process of making Des Moines' more competitive in the Greater DSM housing market relative to suburbs that have long attracted an outsized share of regional housing investments.



2024
Impact

2020-24
Impact to Date



Total investments made through Invest DSM supported projects

\$29.9
MILLION

\$76.8
MILLION



Share of total investment granted by Invest DSM

\$5.2
MILLION

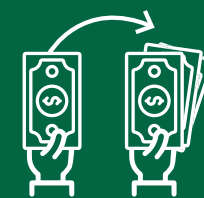
\$14.3
MILLION



Share of total investment made by private property owners

\$24.7
MILLION

\$62.5
MILLION



Amount leveraged from other sources for every dollar granted by Invest DSM

\$7.53

\$4.37



Projects completed

297+

1,334+



% of completed projects that involved existing homeowners

93%

Des Moines Planning Context

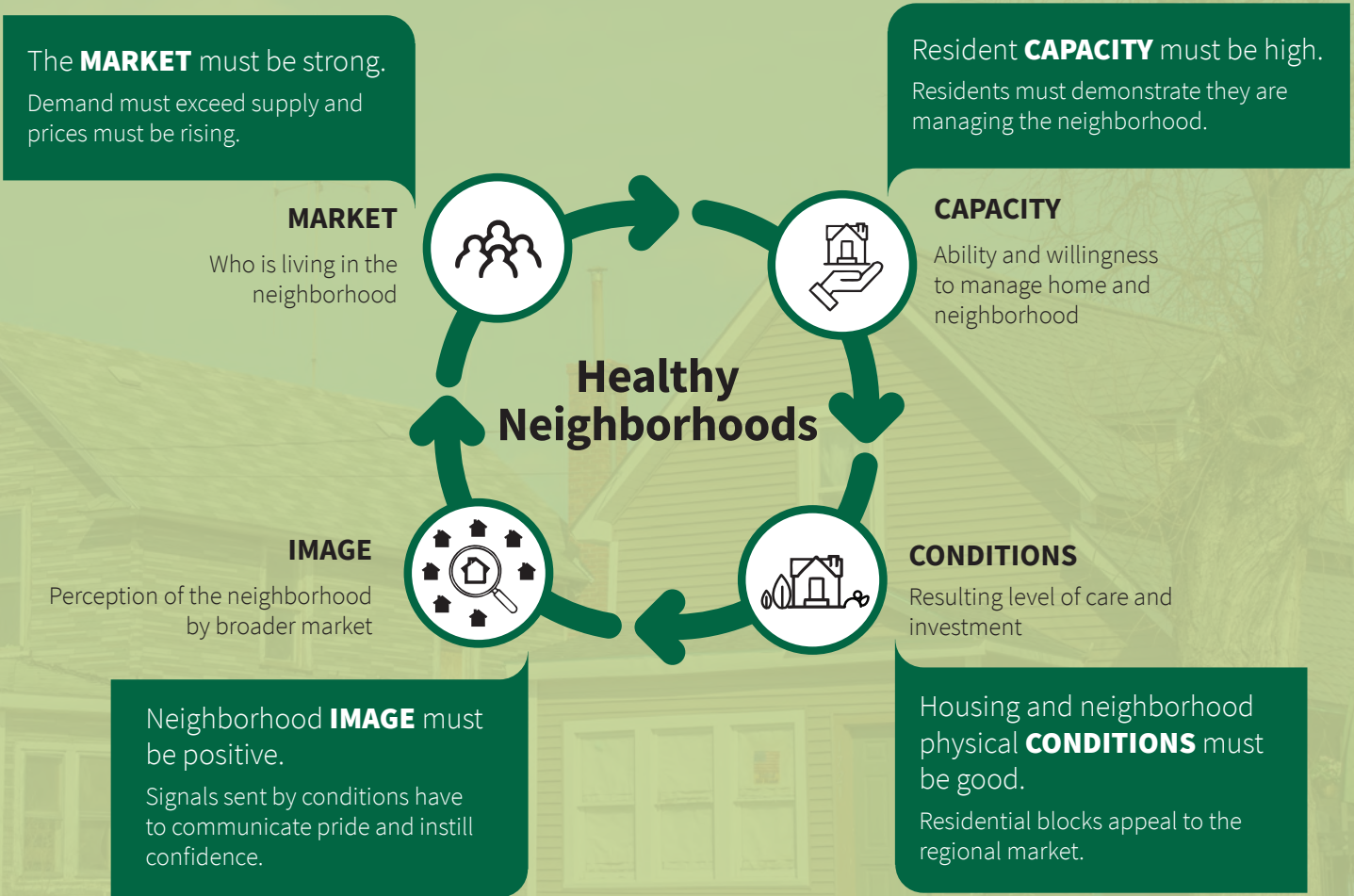
Revitalization is a process that leads to something: a neighborhood that is vital and healthy. But what is a healthy neighborhood?

The **2017-2018 evaluation of Des Moines' Neighborhood Revitalization Program** describes a healthy neighborhood in terms of a four-factor investment cycle, with each factor supporting the others.



“A healthy neighborhood is a place where it make sense for residents and owners to invest their time, energy and money.

The four factors that move together in a self-reinforcing cycle to determine neighborhood health are the MARKET (or who is there), its CAPACITY (or its willingness and ability to manage the neighborhood), the CONDITIONS (or the resulting visible level of care and investment), and the IMAGE (or the perception of the neighborhood held by the broader market). When demand for living in a neighborhood exceeds the supply, the cycle spins in a positive direction, keeping the neighborhood strong. But it can also move in a negative direction, further eroding an already weakened neighborhood.”



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How to Use This Plan

The purpose of this plan for the Union Park Special Investment District is to provide general guidance to the City of Des Moines, Invest DSM, neighborhood residents, and other partners as they work on neighborhood revitalization and improvement activities within the SID boundaries. This guidance is divided into three parts, culminating in a set of activities that are responsive to existing conditions and the neighborhood's vision for the future.

PART 1

Assets, Issues, and Trends

Part 1 provides context for planning in Union Park by identifying what is working and not working and why it matters. The data and analysis in this section point to the major issues to develop strategies around and tie those issues to the four central components of healthy neighborhoods.

PART 2

Vision and Outcomes

Part 2 distills the vision for Union Park from the core attributes and desired outcomes expressed by residents. It also identifies measurements to track to ensure progress toward those outcomes, and describes target markets that are a good match for the neighborhood's vision and its present housing supply.

PART 3

Action Plan

Part 3 presents a series of activities to implement over the plan's 10-year planning horizon. It begins with foundational actions to take citywide, followed by specific steps to take within the SID. It ties each activity to one or more outcomes and identifies the partnerships needed for successful implementation.

We have excellent parks and recreational attractions...

How can we use these assets to draw more people and investment to our neighborhood?

What can we do to make the parks an even stronger part of our neighborhood's lifestyle and image?

All three parts of this plan, ultimately, aim to help address a handful of critical questions that were raised during the planning process and that relate directly to the outcomes and vision described by the plan.

While this plan answers these questions in the form of activities and tools to put into action, these questions should remain at the heart of the implementation process. Coming back to these questions on a regular basis will help to ensure that actions remain tightly focused on what matters most to the future of Union Park.

We have a family-friendly atmosphere...

How can our neighborhood become an even more enticing place for families of all types to set down roots?

Can rising levels of engagement and participation in neighborhood activities help spur greater levels of pride and collaboration at the block level?

We have affordable homes with historic charm...

How can our housing options become even more enticing to families looking for a safe, traditional urban neighborhood?

What can we do to preserve and strengthen the character of our homes and streets?

PART

01 Assets, Issues and Trends

What's working in Union Park today? And what's not working?

These were starting points for defining Union Park's recognizable assets and strengths—important building blocks for any revitalization plan—and for exploring the issues that threaten the neighborhood or hold it back. Community input on both questions informed further analysis of relevant trends and are components of this plan's vision.

Part 1 summarizes these assets, issues, and trends. It also relates them back to the four self-reinforcing factors that define healthy neighborhoods—a strong **market**, high **capacity** to manage change, good physical **conditions**, and positive **image**—to gauge where Union Park current stands on each factor.



PG X	Assets
PG X	Issues
PG X	Key Trends and Issues 1

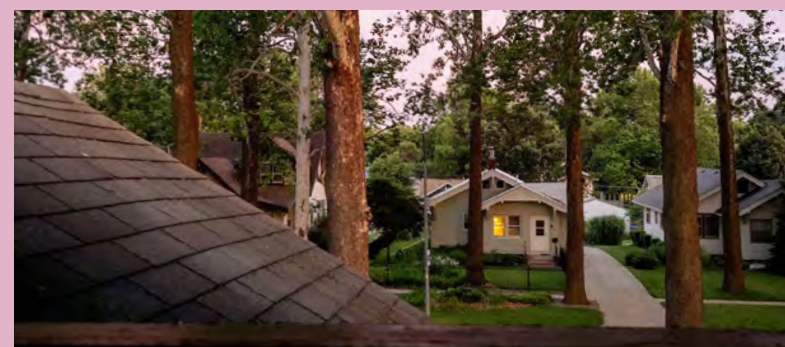
Assets

What does the community think are Union Park's greatest assets and strengths?



The Union Park neighborhood's assets begin with the parks themselves—which residents clearly called out as the area's top strength and selling point. Union Park, Birdland Park, and the marina not only contribute to the quality of life of those who live nearby, but they are also viewed as a key reason for prospective homeowners to choose the neighborhood.

The parks contribute, as well, to other perceived strengths, including the neighborhood's historic charm and overall sense of community and family-friendliness. The relative affordability of housing in the neighborhood—in proximity to great parks—to also viewed as a key asset for attracting and keeping young families.



Excellent parks and recreational attractions

Union Park and Birdland Park are great amenities for neighborhood residents and attract visitors from throughout the area.

Major improvements are anticipated through the implementation of the Birdland Park and Marina Master Plan, which will complement other recent or ongoing investments (the Rocket Slide and carousel).

Homes with historic charm on tree-lined streets

Union Park has many blocks that benefit from the architectural character of 100-year-old homes, great porches, and mature tree canopies.

Moreso than many other Des Moines neighborhoods, Union Park combines historic and quaint residential blocks with historic and quaint public spaces (the parks and riverfront).

Family-friendly atmosphere and sense of community

As a neighborhood dominated by single-family homes and residential blocks, Union Park has an atmosphere of quiet and safety – a good place for people who want a laid-back lifestyle or are looking to settle down and raise a family.

And the Union Park Neighborhood Association has been working to connect neighbors and bring attention to neighborhood assets and sets a high standard for other NAs in Des Moines.

Affordable options for first-time homebuyers

Homes in Union Park have tended to be more affordable and accessible to first-time buyers than neighborhoods in Des Moines with similar amenities. This continues to be the case today, even with the relatively steep rise in home prices since 2020.

It also has a variety of home options, from larger homes closer to the parks, to smaller homes on interior blocks.

Close to downtown and other major Des Moines assets

Union Park is in a great central location. Just a minute or two to I-235. Less than five minutes to East Village and Downtown. 15 minutes from major shopping centers and the airport.

And everyone in the neighborhood is just a short walk from the parks and riverfront.

Issues

What does the community think are Union Park's biggest issues and challenges?



While the affordability of housing in the Union Park neighborhood is viewed as a potential strength when it comes to attracting families looking for ownership opportunities and a good deal, lower prices are the flip side of the biggest issue identified by the community: poorly maintained and vacant properties. Soft demand and disinvestment over decades have resulted in poor property conditions that reinforce relatively low property values.

Related to the poor condition of many private properties is the poor condition (including cleanliness) of shared spaces and rights-of-way, including sidewalks, alleys, and streets—which were also frequently noted by the public during the planning process. And the sense of disorder and absentee ownership created by poorly maintained property may be feeding observations of disorderly behavior on many streets, including speeding, loud music, shouting, and criminal activity.



Poorly maintained and vacant properties on many blocks

Almost every block in the neighborhood seems to have at least one, if not several, homes that show signs of neglect and deferred maintenance, such as peeling paint, broken gutters, or an old roof. And many of these homes probably have interior issues, as well.

There are also a handful of vacant or underutilized commercial properties in the neighborhood, especially along E. 14th Street. They send a negative message about the neighborhood to people who pass by and can make certain parts of the neighborhood feel unsafe.

Few neighborhood-oriented businesses or services

While the neighborhood is in a convenient location, there are very few businesses within the neighborhood where residents can walk to and gather. Captain Roy's is a prominent exception.

Many streets, alleys, and sidewalks are in poor condition

As a neighborhood dominated by single-family homes and residential blocks, Union Park has an atmosphere of quiet and safety – a good place for people who want a laid-back lifestyle or are looking to settle down and raise a family.

And the Union Park Neighborhood Association has been working to connect neighbors and bring attention to neighborhood assets and sets a high standard for other NAs in Des Moines.

Disorderly behavior and speeding or noisy traffic make some areas feel unsafe

The posted speed limit on E. 14th Street is 35mph, but it's not unusual for cars to go 45 or even 50. This makes the street uncomfortable to walk along or cross.

Speeding is also a problem along some of the residential blocks closer to the parks, which is dangerous for kids and makes the neighborhood less walkable than it should be.

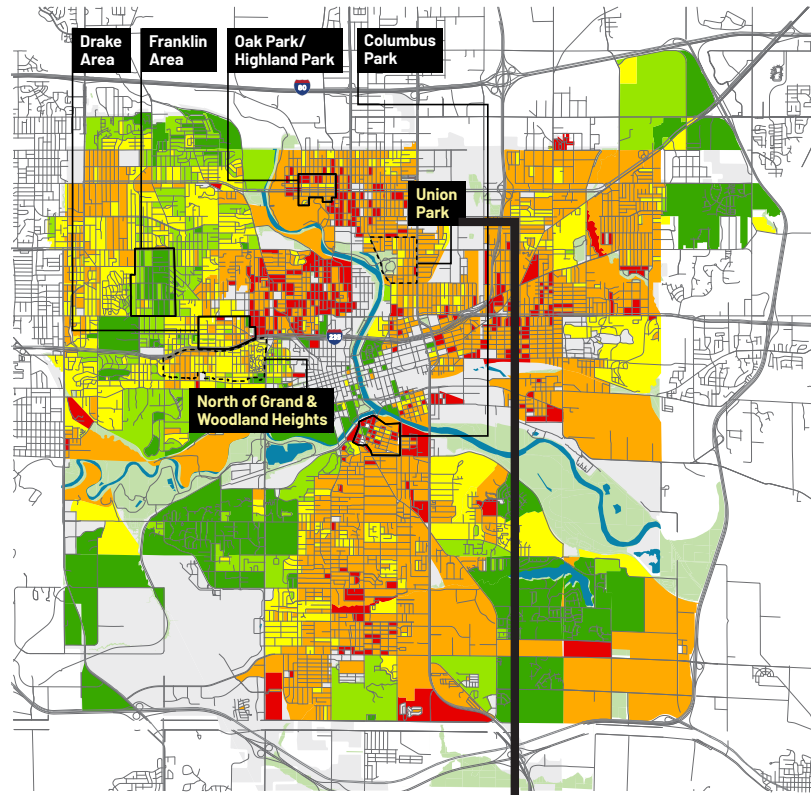
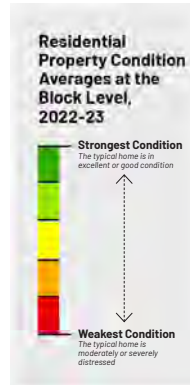
Key Findings

What do we know about conditions and trends in Union Park?

Almost one-third of Union Park's homes show visible signs of deferred maintenance, and relatively few are in good condition

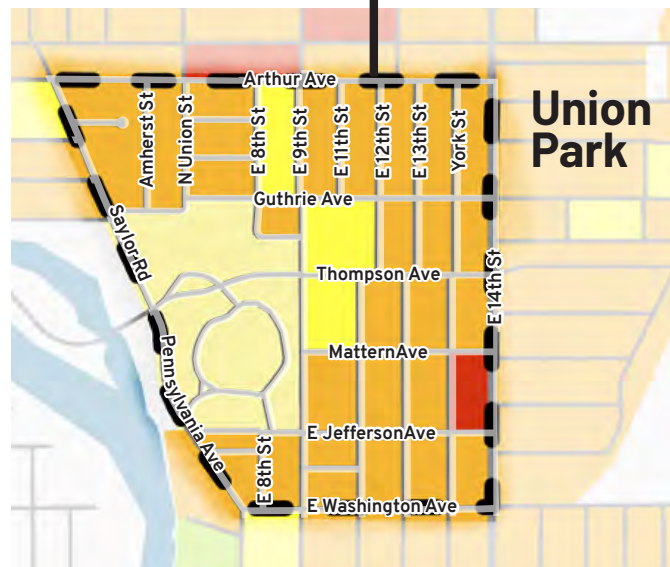
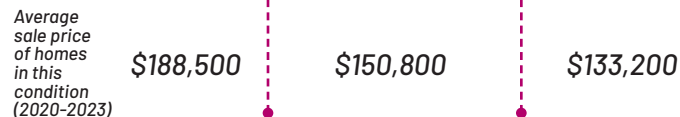
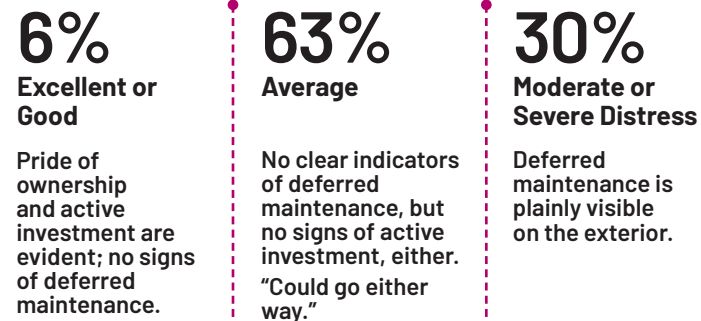
Addressing decades of disinvestment in Des Moines' housing is part of the work of making the city's neighborhoods better for current and future residents. And an updated survey of housing conditions across the city in 2022-23 showed how much conditions differ from place to place.

In Union Park, as in other "middle neighborhoods" that are now designated as Special Investment Districts, conditions are not the strongest nor the weakest in the city. But there are significant vulnerabilities that could degrade overall conditions in the coming decade. Only 6% of homes in Union Park, for example, were found to be in excellent or good condition based on the 2022-23 survey. Nearly one-third were already showing visible signs of deferred maintenance, and a majority (63%) were deemed "average" which means they could tip in either direction depending on the ability and willingness of homeowners to actively invest in their homes.



Source: czbLLC windshield survey of conditions for all properties with residential uses

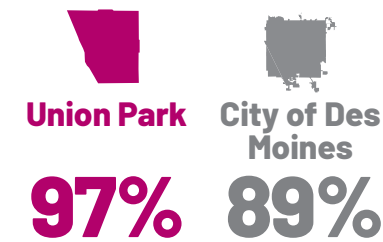
% of residential properties in Union Park that are...



Union Park's housing inventory is dominated by single-family homes, and most of them are smaller, low-priced properties

With only a handful of exceptions, Union Park is a neighborhood of detached single-family homes, which represent 97% of all residential properties. And of these homes, three out of four are smaller homes (2-3 bedrooms, 1 bathroom) built between 1900 and 1930.

Share of residential properties that are single-family homes

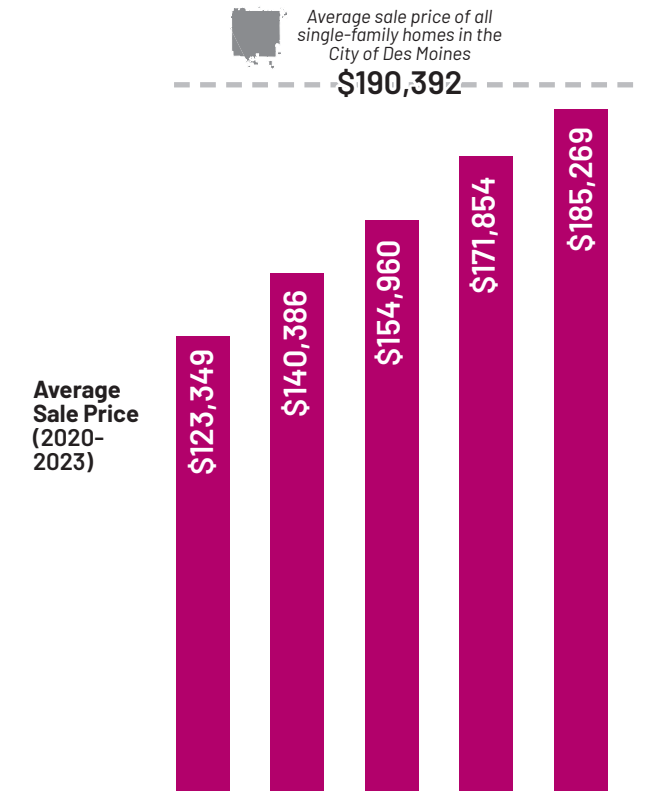


A challenge with this large inventory of smaller homes is that they have been less marketable than larger homes in recent decades (especially those with multiple bathrooms). As a result, they have incurred higher levels of deferred maintenance, are priced much lower than other types of properties, and are increasingly prone to absentee-ownership.

So, while these smaller homes are relatively affordable to first-time buyers, they come with a long list of issues to resolve and improvements to make that could exceed the value of the property.

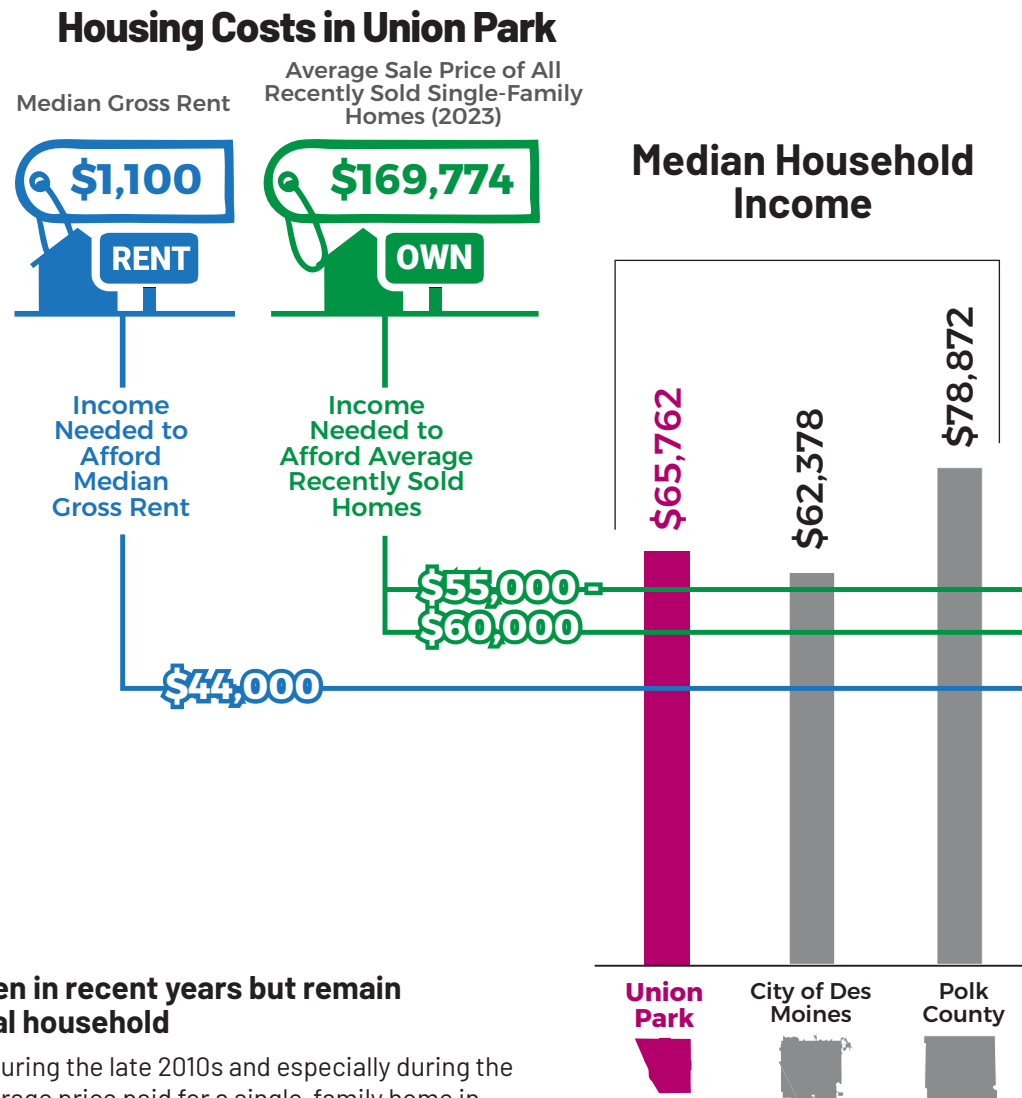
Characteristics of Most Common Single-Family Home Configurations in Union Park

Bedrooms	2	3	4	3	4
Bathrooms	1	1	1	2	2
Share of single-family homes in Union Park	40%	35%	10%	7%	5%
% Showing Signs of Moderate or Severe Distress	31%	34%	24%	25%	22%
% Owner Occupied	79%	82%	86%	80%	86%



Source: czbLLC analysis of City of Des Moines assessment rolls, MLS sales records, and property condition survey

Key Findings | Conditions and Trends



Housing costs have risen in recent years but remain affordable to the typical household

Housing costs accelerated during the late 2010s and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The average price paid for a single-family home in Union Park rose 29% between 2020 and 2023, which was higher than the citywide increase.

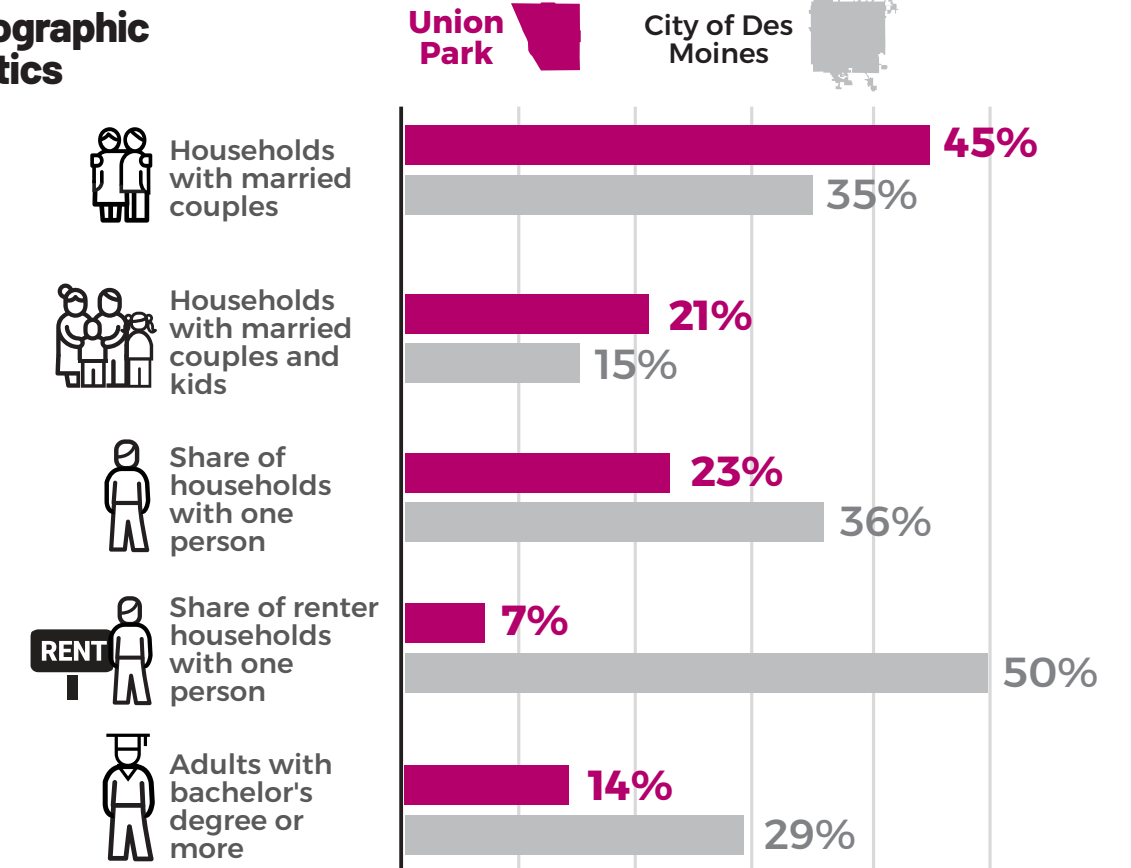
But costs in Union Park were low to begin with, and current home prices and rents remain largely affordable to Union Park's typical household. As is the case throughout the region, however, households making less than \$40,000 will struggle to find good housing there

Source: czbLLC analysis of American Community Survey 5-year estimates for 2022 (rent and income) and MLS sales data; "income needed to afford" is based on 30% of income

% increase in average single-family sales prices from 2020 through 2023



Select Demographic Characteristics



Source: czbLLC analysis of American Community Survey 5-year estimates for 2022

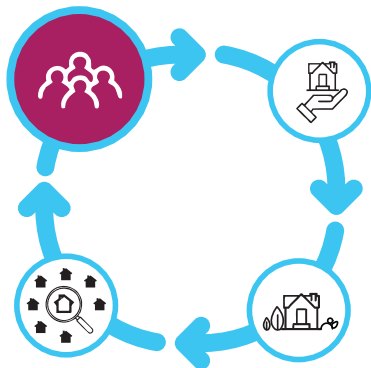
Union Park housing stock contributes to a higher concentration of family households

The dominance of single-family housing in Union Park almost certainly contributes to Union Park having a higher concentration of family households than the city as a whole, as well as a much lower rate of people living alone.

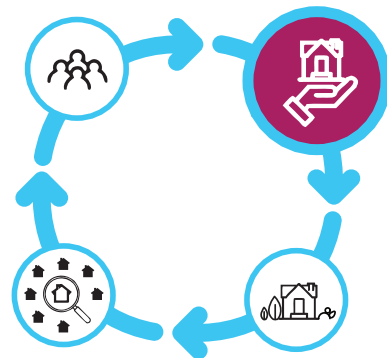
Income is also a factor. Fewer adults in Union Park have college degrees than in the rest of Des Moines, and many households rely on multiple income earners to achieve incomes that are slightly higher than the citywide median.

What do the assets, issues, and trends identified during the planning process suggest about neighborhood health in Union Park? How does it fare on each of the four factors that contribute to health?

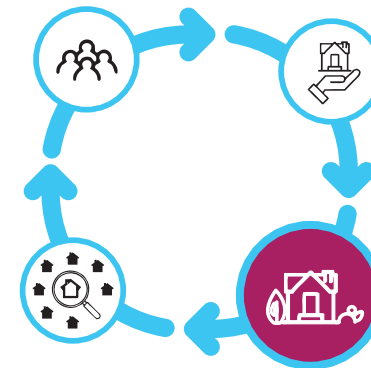
MARKET



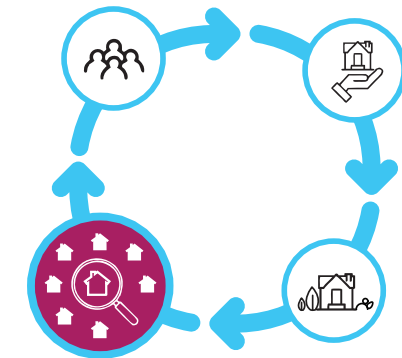
CAPACITY



CONDITIONS



IMAGE



Where are we now?

Despite rising sales prices in recent years, Union Park's market remains soft. The neighborhood's largest and most marketable homes sell, on average, for a price that is below the citywide average for all single-family homes (and well below the regional average).

The willingness of households in Greater Des Moines to pay for and upgrade housing in Union Park is insufficient for a well-functioning market to exist.

Where are we now?

Union Park has an active neighborhood association that is making strides to connect neighbors and bring people together, which is a very important part of overall capacity. At the block-level, however, resident leadership capacity to solve problems and instill pride of place is spotty.

Where are we now?

Private property conditions are clearly an issue and extend to the condition of sidewalks, streets, and alleys. Conditions cannot be considered strong until a much larger share of properties are showing signs of active investment and pride.

Where are we now?

Events coordinated by the neighborhood association and investments in the parks can be expected to benefit Union Park's image within the city and region. But they are pushing against a prevailing image established by years of disinvestment and negative signals.

What will it take to make progress toward a stronger market?

The gap between the cost of high-quality housing improvements and the projected market value of the finished product is a key barrier to progress. Helping homeowners and buyers overcome that gap with financial assistance is an important near-term step. As upgrades become more widespread and property values rise, the gap will begin to shrink.

What will it take to make progress toward a stronger capacity?

Getting residents excited about working together to raise standards on their block will be a fundamental part of the work in Union Park. Raising awareness about the importance of exhibiting pride, through simple exterior improvements and picking up litter, will help people think about the influence they have on potential homebuyers ("Who'll buy the house across the street from me?") and on the future of the neighborhood.

What will it take to make progress toward stronger conditions?

Improving the market will contribute to better conditions because it will make more financial sense for people to upgrade a home. But translating neighborhood pride into higher standards of upkeep and closer attention to detail is critical. Working together, neighbors need to see higher standards as something they deserve and that shows respect for their neighborhood.

What will it take to make progress toward a stronger image?

A well-honed and well-delivered message based on core attributes (see Part 2), along with progress on the market, capacity, and condition factors of neighborhood health, will all have a positive impact on image. And so will an important change in mindset: neighbors should see everything they do as sending positive or negative signals about what people can expect the neighborhood's future to be like.

PART
02 Vision and Outcomes



**What do we intend our neighborhood to be in 10 years?
What will progress look like?**

Exploration of Union Park’s assets, challenges, and key trends helped to clarify thinking about the type of place residents want the neighborhood to be in a decade and the types of outcomes that would describe progress. Those outcomes, combined with a prioritization of neighborhood assets, pointed the planning process toward an ambitious yet realistic vision for the future of Union Park.

Part 2 summarizes this vision, provides ways to track progress on neighborhood outcomes, and offers guidance on how to relate Union Park’s vision to the needs of prospective households.

PG X	Vision Framework
PG X	Outcomes and Progress Measurements
PG X	Target Markets

Vision Framework



The vision for Union Park provides the “why” behind the activities proposed in this plan. In so doing, it represents a basis against which to shape and test decisions about policies, programs, and strategies.

How will a proposed action contribute to the realization of the vision? Answering this question convincingly—and doing so as part of a dialogue that also connects to the four characteristics of healthy neighborhoods—will be an important and ongoing process during implementation of this plan. The primary components of the vision—core attributes and outcomes—provide approachable steps to this process. If an activity relates directly to multiple core attributes and outcomes, it is likely to be well-aligned with the neighborhood’s vision.

Besides providing overall direction for efforts that aim to improve the neighborhood, the vision for Union Park also represents a brand to live up to. Everything that happens in Union Park will send subtle and not-so-subtle signals to existing residents and potential future residents about the type of place they can expect it to be in coming years. Every improvement project should help to demonstrate this vision—or reinforce the brand—in some way. And every form of communication about the neighborhood should help to underscore its brand—especially in the minds of households that are good fits for what the neighborhood has and is striving to become.

Core Attributes

These are the assets and characteristics that residents value the most, that form the core of the Union Park identity, and that serve as chief selling points to future residents.

They are also a means of prioritizing scarce resources. Whenever possible, actions and investments should highlight and strengthen these attributes.



Excellent parks and recreation for outdoor lifestyles

We have prime access to spacious parks and riverside trails that are increasingly popular, and we’re well-known for our historic carousel and rocket slide. Ongoing investments are enhancing these assets, making them a bigger part of the daily routine for our neighbors and families.



Family-friendly atmosphere

We’re already a neighborhood of families who enjoy the quiet and leafy atmosphere, yard-space, and being around other families that appreciate city-living.



Affordable homes with historic charm

Our streets are lined with 100-year-old homes that have kept their Arts & Crafts and Period Revival charms, and price ranges from -starter homes to move-up homes.

Vision

Drawn from the core attributes and outcomes, the vision expresses an intention for Union Park’s future that the neighborhood is striving to live up to.

The vision also functions as a “brand statement” for the neighborhood—a promise to those who choose to invest their time, energy, and resources here.

Union Park neighbors are active people who have outdoor fun and relaxation at our doorsteps, whether it’s a stroll down a tree-lined street, walking the dog through Union Park, taking the kids to the carousel and rocket slide, cycling along the river, or hanging out with friends at the marina. We even use our doorsteps to have a good time—listening to music with neighbors during PorchFest, or sitting with family and enjoying the fresh air.

Families are welcome and plentiful in Union Park, taking advantage of the quiet streets, yards, and parks to let kids be kids. And they find our housing both charming and accessible—with starter homes and move-up homes alike featuring historic touches and durability that make setting down roots here affordable and a good bargain.



Outcomes



Outcomes are the conditions that will help to mark progress toward, or maintenance of, the vision.



Parks and amenities are true destinations



Streets and alleys are safe and clean; they show that people care



Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families



Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities

Outcomes and Progress Measurements



The general outcomes that contribute to the overall vision for Union Park, and which will signal movement in the right direction, all speak to one or more of the factors that contribute to healthy neighborhoods: **market, capacity, condition, and image.** Advancing these outcomes, therefore, is about realizing Union Park's vision and becoming firmly planted within the cycle of neighborhood health.

Tracking progress on these outcomes requires more specificity about what each outcome really means. And it requires, in some cases, a quantitative indicator that can be routinely collected and reflects what the neighborhood is trying to achieve. For conditions that are not easily measured with a statistic, a more qualitative indicator may be needed to convey an overall impression of whether people think that progress is being made.

The following table provides additional detail on the meaning of each general outcome based on public input during the planning process. It also proposes a set of **quantitative** and **qualitative** indicators to track, including current or baseline conditions and target measurements to move towards.

Key Measurements to Monitor

BASELINE

GOALS




Parks and amenities are true destinations

Investments at Union Park and Birdland Park have created a compelling riverside destination


New businesses enhance the neighborhood as a destination and serve as local gathering spots

Parks, businesses, and events are cohesively connected and promoted

Heritage Carousel tickets sold as proxy for special visits to Union Park 


XXX

YYY

Number of recognizable "third space" businesses within SID where neighbors can meet up 

XXX

YYY

Number of events that cross-promote parks and businesses 

XXX

YYY




Streets and alleys are safe and clean; they show that people care

Traffic is calmer and safer on both residential blocks and thoroughfares

Streets and alleys are cleaner, with less litter and junk


Sidewalks and bus stops are in better condition

The public tree canopy is well-managed

Share of tree planting spaces in public right-of-way that are occupied 

XXX

YYY

Coverage of overall tree canopy 

XXX

YYY

Number of organized litter/debris clean-up events 

XXX

YYY



Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families

Families find affordable starter-home opportunities


Parents are comfortable letting their kids play in the neighborhood

Families and neighbors use small and large events to gather and connect

Owner-occupancy rate of single-family homes 

XXX

YYY

Share of households that are families with children 

XXX

YYY




Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities

More and more homes are receiving major updates to make them more livable and marketable


Attention to curb appeal is growing

More homeowners value and invest in the historic character of their properties

Share of residential properties in excellent or good condition 

XXX

YYY

Issuance rate of building permits 

XXX

YYY

Target Markets

Homebuyer Target Markets



Union Park’s vision, and the outcomes that describe it, are reflections of what existing residents value about the neighborhood and how they define progress. And, indeed, existing residents will have significant roles to play in achieving their vision.



Currently, around 13% of households in the U.S. move in any given year. This means that one out of eight households on an average block can be expected to move this year because of a job, a change in life stage, changing needs, finding better housing options elsewhere, or some other reason.

For a market to be considered healthy, those who move out need to be replaced in short order. If not, vacancy rates rise—and so does the probability that property values stagnate and conditions falter. In the case of single-family homes being vacated by an owner-occupant, a healthy market is one where the home is quickly sold and the new owner has the willingness and capacity to take good care of the property.

When a predictable stream of good buyers exists, homeowners will have greater confidence that their investment in interior and exterior upgrades will have a positive impact on their equity and make it easier to sell at a fair price when the time comes. If a homeowner questions whether a good buyer will materialize when

it’s time to sell, they might hesitate to make even modest improvements, which, when repeated throughout a neighborhood, affects condition and image in ways that reinforce a soft market cycle.

Planning to revitalize a neighborhood, therefore, requires proactive attention to the stream of buyers. Based on Union Park’s core attributes and selling points, what markets is the neighborhood in a good position to appeal to now and in coming years? And how can the neighborhood speak to those markets in ways that improve the likelihood of a good stream of buyers?



This planning process identified two general target markets that are likely to value the housing stock and amenities that Union Park has to offer today, and who will find the neighborhood increasingly appealing as the housing stock and amenities are improved.

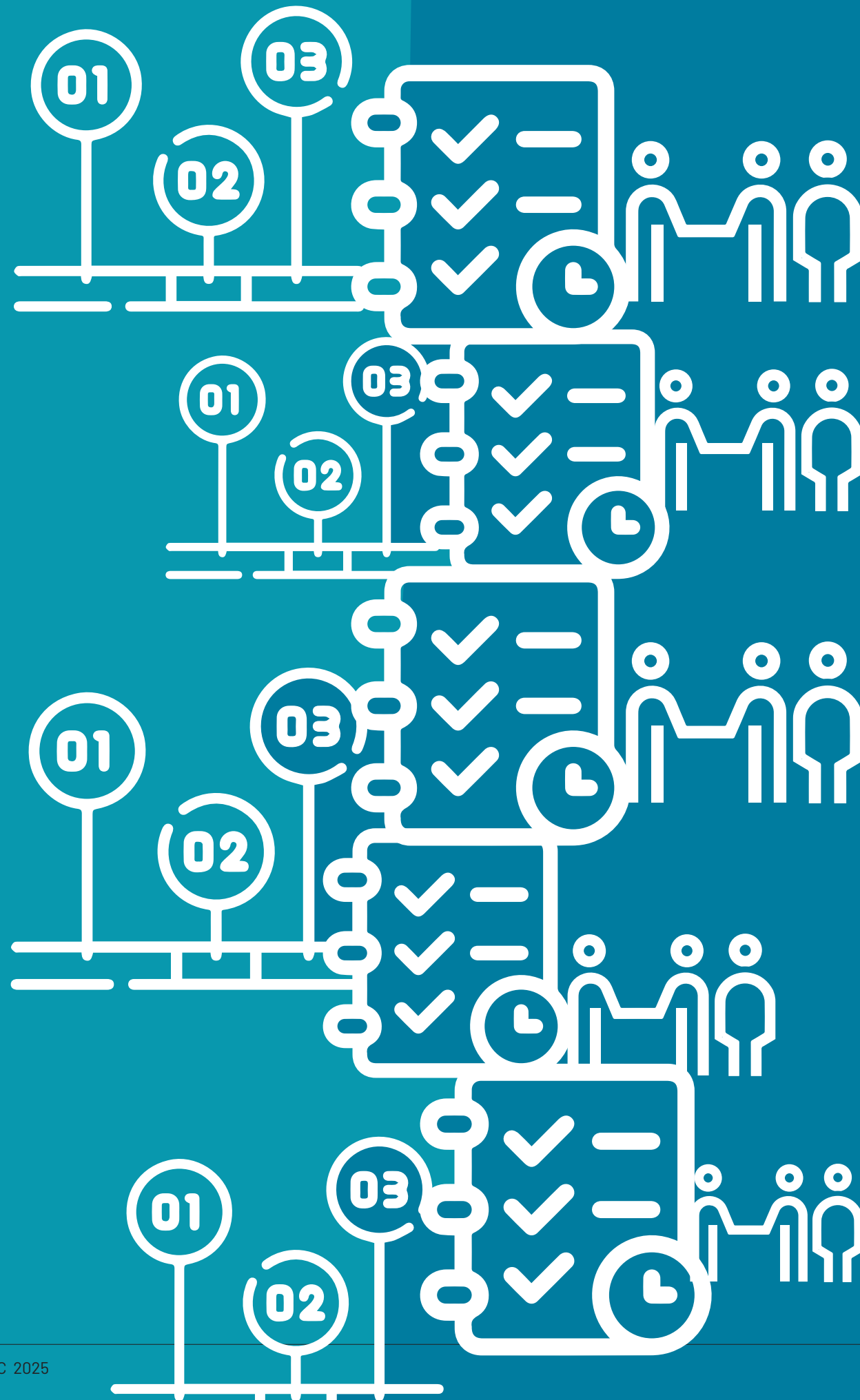


Identifying these target markets does not exclude other markets from the neighborhood—rather, it’s a tool for focusing limited branding and marketing resources in ways that speak directly to the highest probability buyers.



Target Market	Young Growing Families	Small Settled Households
General Profile	<p>Couples in 20s or early 30s with 1 or 2 young kids</p> <p>Early career with 1.5 or 2 incomes per household (\$50,000 to \$70,000 total); capacity to maintain and improve a home</p>	<p>Singles living alone or with roommate</p> <p>Couples with no kids or with 1 or 2 school-age kids</p> <p>Established wage earners (ages 35-55); household income of \$70,000 to \$100,000</p>
Home needs	<p>3+ bedrooms 2+ bathrooms</p> <p>Looking for a starter house with sufficient space for modern needs</p> <p>Able to “grow into the neighborhood” via home upgrades or move-up to a larger home</p>	<p>2-3 bedrooms 1.5+ bathrooms</p> <p>Looking for a “move-up” home or an improved “move-in ready” home</p> <p>Has capacity to improve and customize</p>
Neighborhood Fit	<p>Appreciate Union and Birdland Parks as family-friendly spaces</p> <p>Attracted by proximity to river and trails for family recreation</p> <p>Ties to North High School</p>	<p>Appreciate quiet streets, greenspace, and breathing room</p> <p>View homes in Union Park as a good bargain</p> <p>See a long-term upside for neighborhood based on location and amenities</p>

PART 03 Action Plan



What steps should we take to advance the vision for Union Park?

Who does what?

And how will everything fit together?

A realistic neighborhood vision tied to specific outcomes can be translated into meaningful actions—a house renovated, a tree planted, an alley cleaned-up, a community event reimaged. But each action requires money, time, energy, and skill—and they need to be carefully coordinated so that their overall impact is greater than the sum of individual projects.

Part 3 is an action plan that outlines a limited but specific set of projects and activities, describes how to approach their implementation, and relates them to each other, the outcomes that underpin the neighborhood’s vision, and the factors that influence neighborhood health.

PG X	Action Plan Overview
PG X	Tools & Activities
PG X	Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity
PG X	Neighborhood Improvement
PG X	Implementation Summary

Action Plan Overview

This action plan for the Union Park Special Investment District includes specific work to accomplish within the SID. As with previous work in Des Moines' SID, however, implementation will require acknowledgment of uncertainty and the need to balance competing demands for the same resources—it is an active process that requires discretion, decision-making, and trial-and-error. It also requires that certain actions be taken at the citywide-level to support SID-specific actions.

Implementation Principles for Neighborhood Revitalization in Des Moines

This plan is a reflection of conditions and opportunities that currently exist in the City of Des Moines and in Union Park—it responds to what is known. It is likely, however, that unforeseen things will happen over the next 10 years, as will the need to make decisions that are not and cannot be articulated by this plan.

For that reason, an established set of neighborhood revitalization principles identified during the planning of Des Moines' original Special Investment Districts will be a crucial part of the implementation process—providing a consistent basis for making choices that need to be made that are not predicted by this plan. The following table demonstrates how the principles can be used to critically examine and think about circumstances that arise.



Multiple projects are competing for limited resources.



A new opportunity or challenge emerges.



Frustration arises with the pace of progress.

Strengths and Assets	Which project does more to protect or strengthen key assets or core attributes?	Is a response needed to protect or strengthen key assets or core attributes? If not, why is it worth our time?	Where are we having the most success? What can we learn from that and apply elsewhere?
Targeted	Which project contributes the most to a clustering of visible improvement?	If this is worth a response, how do we do so in a way that doesn't scatter our limited attention and resources too widely?	Is it possible to focus our efforts and resources even more tightly to transform market behaviors?
Patience	Which project is the best long-term bet? Are we avoiding a decision based on short-term expediency?	In responding to something new, are we dropping something else too soon? What are the opportunity costs now and five years from now?	Revitalization doesn't happen overnight—are we giving this enough time?
Outcomes and Measurements	Which project is likely to do the most to advance one or more outcomes?	Which outcomes are we advancing by responding to this opportunity or challenge?	Do our data and experience point to necessary adjustments in what we are doing or how we are doing it?

Foundational Citywide Actions

This action plan assumes that certain policies of the City of Des Moines will be continued or modified in order to provide the resource or policy support necessary to achieve Union Park's vision and outcomes.

Three policy areas, in particular, are considered foundational to the implementation of this plan.

Continue investments in neighborhood capacity and leadership

A key finding of the Neighborhood Revitalization Program Review completed in 2018 for the City of Des Moines was the success and importance of work over nearly three decades to build resident leadership capacity and cultivate a network of high-functioning neighborhood associations.

This work remains no less important now. And it is likely a central factor behind Invest DSM's impact in Special Investment Districts to date. Without an infrastructure of neighborhood leadership in place to communicate with residents and generate enthusiasm around reinvestment, it would take longer to achieve such results.

Support for neighborhood associations and resident leadership development—citywide—is a critical investment that pays dividends and should continue.

Continue commitments to middle neighborhood revitalization as a necessary complement to affordable housing investments

The importance of investing in vulnerable middle neighborhoods—another key finding of the 2018 program review—is also no less important today. As the *Status Report on Neighborhood Revitalization Efforts, 2018–2023* found, perceptible progress in Des Moines since 2018 did not change Des Moines' competitive position relative to its regional neighbors. Making sure that more neighborhoods in the city become viable options for households in Greater Des Moines is fundamental to the city's long-term fiscal health, its ability to pay for critical services, and quality of life within neighborhoods.

And as the City of Des Moines' 2025 Housing Strategy demonstrates, the city's 40,000+ small homes—most of which are in middle neighborhoods—will require reinvestment solutions ensure a high quality and accessible housing supply in the decades ahead.

Joint financial support for Invest DSM by the City of Des Moines and Polk County should be continued as part of a wider effort to achieve citywide and regional housing goals—and should be viewed as an important complement to affordable housing investments.

Widen enforcement of the Property Maintenance Code to include owner-occupied homes supplemented by compliance assistance

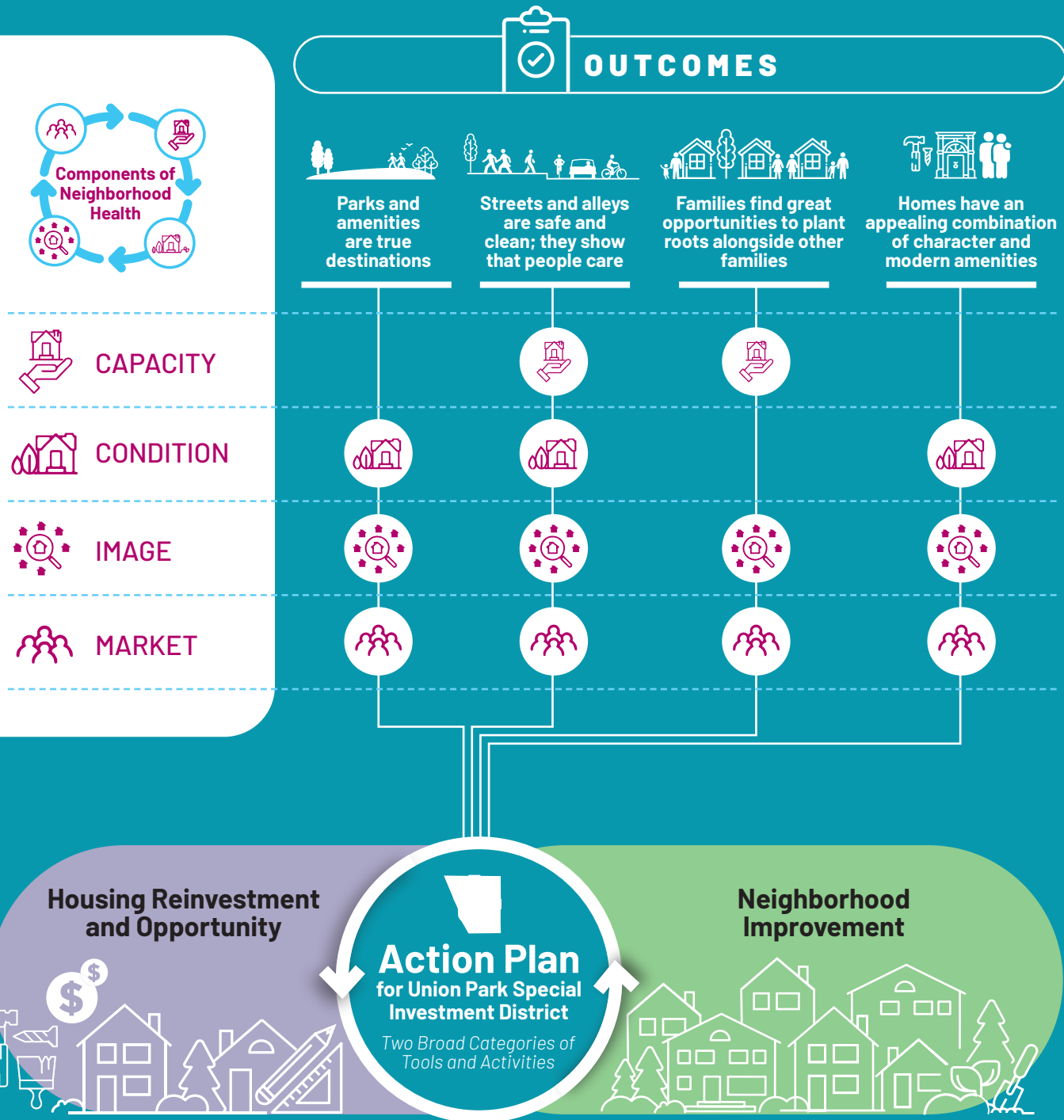
Enforcement of the property maintenance code in Des Moines has been limited to rental housing. Amending the city's ordinances to widen enforcement to single-family dwellings occupied by the owner is an important step toward improving standards of maintenance and preserving the housing stock. This is especially the case middle neighborhoods where single-family homes are by far the dominant type of residential property.

This should be paired, however, with a continued—if not expanded—commitment to assisting low-income or disabled owners with code compliance. The ION (Improving Our Neighborhoods) program has become an important tool for helping eligible households in Des Moines with emergency repairs and has a vital role to play as part of a comprehensive set of housing programs.

Translating Outcomes into Actions

Union Park’s desired outcomes, as defined in Part 2, are components of the vision that describe the type of place residents want the neighborhood to be in 2035. Each outcome also relates to three or four of the basic components of neighborhood health.

Based on these outcomes and their connections to neighborhood health, a set of responsive tools and activities is proposed in this action that can be divided into two general categories: those that advance **Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity** and those that would influence **Neighborhood Improvement** more broadly.



While some of the proposed tools and activities can be clearly tied to a single outcome, most have the potential to advance two or more outcomes. As this Action Plan evolves with time and experience, opportunities to add, expand, or replace individual activities will arise. When this happens, activities that connect to multiple outcomes—and that apply Des Moines’ Principles for Neighborhood Revitalization—are strongly encouraged.

TOOLS	OUTCOMES			
	Parks and amenities are true destinations	Streets and alleys are safe and clean; they show that people care	Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families	Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities
Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity				
Promote Block Challenge Participation		✓	✓	✓
Promote Homeowner Renovation and Single-Family Developer Programs			✓	✓
Begin Proactive Focus on Small House Reinvestment			✓	✓
Create Contractor’s Network for Sensitive Rehab				✓
Neighborhood Improvement				
Boost Neighborhood Activities and Clean Ups		✓	✓	
Improve Park Features to Enhance Destination Status	✓			
Consider Additional Neighborhood Services at Birdland Park	✓			
Activate Small Neighborhood Commercial Opportunities	✓			
Accelerate Alley and Sidewalk Improvements		✓		✓
Strengthen and Maintain the Tree Canopy	✓	✓		✓
Make E. 14th Street a More Safe and Attractive Gateway	✓	✓		

Tools & Activities

Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity

Promote Block Challenge Grant Program

OUTCOMES



Streets and alleys are safe and clean; they show that people care



Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families



Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities



What Generate strong levels of participation in Invest DSM’s Block Challenge Grant Program to jumpstart interactions between neighbors and build leadership capacity at the block level.

Invest DSM’s Block Challenge Grant Program offers matching grants (up to \$2,500) for exterior home improvements to each participant in self-organized groups with five or more neighbors.

No income restrictions apply to participants.

Why The City of Des Moines has offered its own form of the Block Challenge program for five years, open to parts of Des Moines outside of Special Investment Districts. But blocks in Union Park have demonstrated no interest in the program.

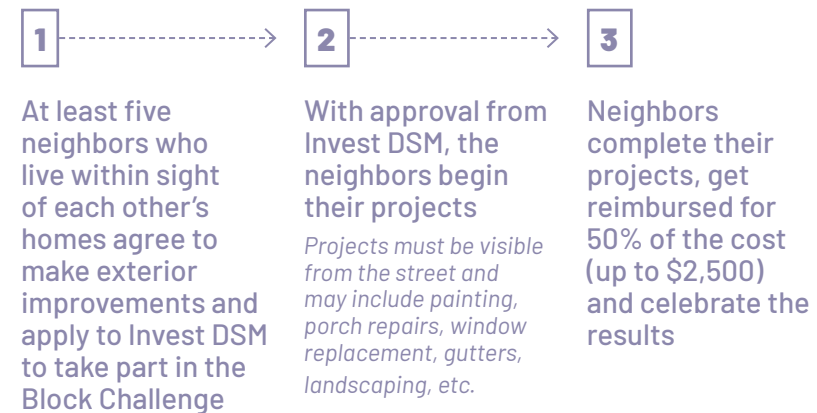
This type of program is a precursor to more advanced reinvestment activities. Getting blocks within Union Park to self-organize and be enthusiastic about home improvements in the first few years of SID activity will lay the groundwork for greater levels of participation and investment in the future.

How Invest DSM, the Union Park Neighborhood Association, and other partners will need to work together to communicate program details to neighbors and generate interest in small, block-level efforts to boost property conditions and display pride of ownership.

Highlighting the work of Block Challenge recipients in 2025 and 2026 will be critical to making participation in the program contagious.

Block Challenge Grant Program

How does it work?



Tools & Activities

Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity

Promote Homeowner Renovation and Single-Family Developer Programs

OUTCOMES



Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families



Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities



What Generate awareness about and interest in Invest DSM’s Homeowner Renovation and Single-Family Developer Programs.

Through grants, both programs support major exterior and interior renovations in order to improve the condition and marketability of the single-family housing supply.

No income restrictions apply to participants of either program .

Why Only 6% of homes in Union Park show signs of active investment and are currently in excellent or good condition. This is due, in part, to large gaps between what it costs to complete major home upgrades and the likely return on investment when an owner sells. These “appraisal gaps” have long inhibited major home improvements.

How Invest DSM, the Union Park Neighborhood Association, and other partners will need to communicate program details to generate understanding and interest.

Early activity is likeliest on blocks where homes are already in better condition and owner-occupancy rates are highest.

Homeowner Renovation Program

Program covers larger internal and external projects, including bathroom additions, kitchen remodels, and new mechanical systems.

Program users must be owner-occupants and projects must follow design and construction standards to ensure long-term quality.

Level of Assistance

Program guidelines vary by SID and are updated annually by Invest DSM. In the past, program grants have covered 20% to 50% of qualifying project costs (up to \$75,000) depending on the project and neighborhood.



Single-Family Developer Program

Program covers major rehab or new construction of single-family homes.

Program users may be rehabbers or developers who agree to sell the finished home to an owner-occupant. Projects must follow design and construction standards to ensure long-term quality.

Level of Assistance

The amount contributed by Invest DSM toward a qualifying project is equal to the gap between the project’s cost and the price ultimately paid by a new owner-occupant.



Tools & Activities

Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity

Begin Proactive Focus on Small House Reinvestment

OUTCOMES



Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families



Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities



Tools & Activities

Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity

Create Contractor's Network for Sensitive Rehab

OUTCOMES



Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities



What Use existing programs and capacity of Invest DSM and other agencies to explicitly promote and undertake improvements to small, single-bathroom homes.

This work should pursue a range of outcomes, including:

Modest Owner Upgrades: Repairs and upgrades that result in an improved owner-occupied small house

Modest Rental Upgrades: Repairs and upgrades to a small rented house that preserves affordable renter-occupancy

Major Upgrades: Renovations that add space and amenities (including bathrooms) to transform a home's marketability

Why Small, single-bathroom homes make up a large share of homes in Union Park and tend to have the poorest conditions and lowest prices and property values. Where these homes are clustered on the same blocks, major reinvestment and improved conditions are unlikely with focused support.

Over time, owner-occupancy rates for these properties fall and poorly maintained rentals become the norm.

How Invest DSM:
Promote and encourage the use of the Homeowner Renovation Program and Single-Family Developer Program on small houses.
Use Invest DSM's capacity as a rehabber to acquire and renovate small houses on a strategic basis to demonstrate opportunities to others.

Other Agencies:
Assist income-eligible owners with upgrades; assist income-eligible buyers with purchase + rehab.
Assist landlords in good standing with upgrades to small single-family rentals.

What Establish a network of contractors specializing in refurbishing original features in older homes (windows, carpentry, masonry) to promote sensitivity to historical details and to connect home rehabbers with skilled tradespeople.

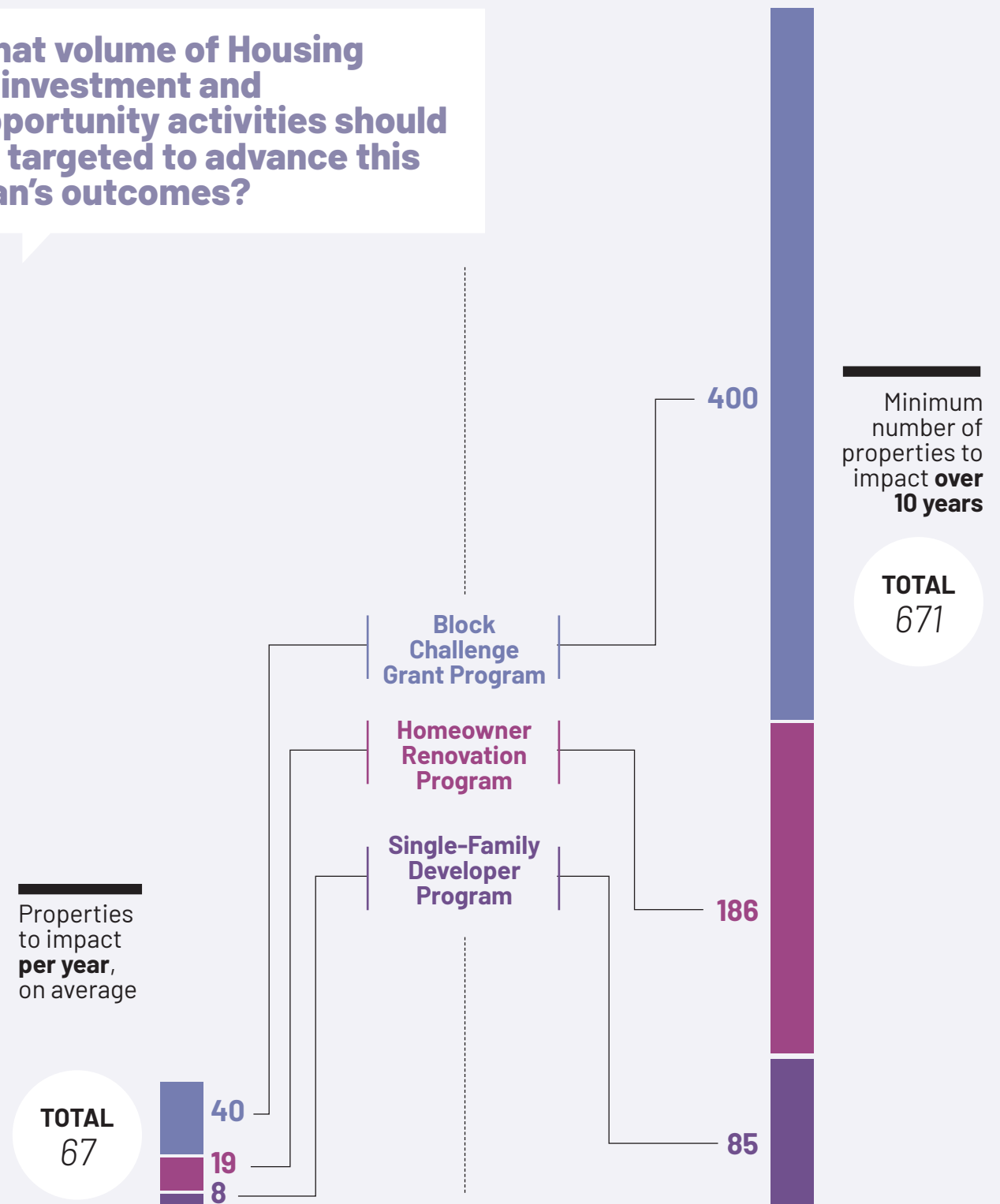
Why The historic charm of Union Park's homes is an asset, and the retention of that charm during renovation is an important goal to promote.
Creating demand for the skills required to sensitively repair older homes will help to keep those skills economically viable.

How Invest DSM, through its connections with local contractors who work in city neighborhoods, should build a formal list of contractors who specialize in maintaining and repairing original features of older homes. Distribute the list to homeowners as a resource.

Tools & Activities

Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity

What volume of Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity activities should be targeted to advance this plan's outcomes?



Tools & Activities

Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity

How might the Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity activities, in concert with other programs, take shape on a block in Union Park?

Year 1

Seven occupants on the block apply to participate in the Block Challenge Grant Program. They use the matching grants on a variety of projects, including painting, landscaping, and other curb appeal enhancements.

Years 2+3

One of the homeowners uses the Homeowner Renovation Program to remodel their kitchen, convert a small bedroom into a bathroom, and rebuild their front porch. Two other owners start making small exterior improvements because they sense progress and feel more confident.

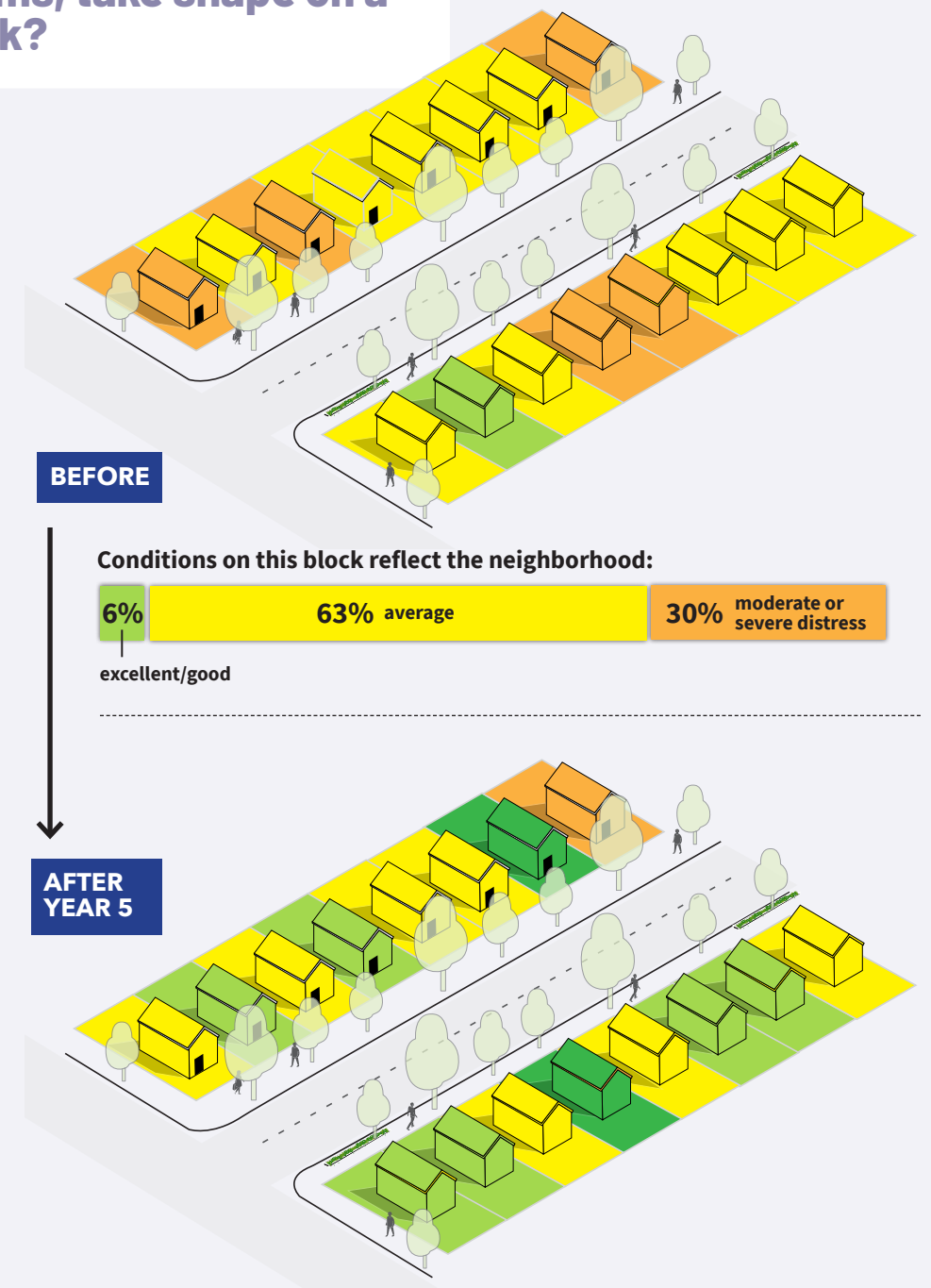
Year 4

Invest DSM acquires a small distressed home on the open market. It does a gut rehab that adds a bathroom and sells to a new owner-occupant. The city's ION program assists a homeowner with roof and gutter repairs.

Year 5

11 occupants on the block apply to the Block Challenge Grant Program and use the matching grants to expand on the exterior improvements that, by now, are very noticeable.

And the work continues...



Tools & Activities

Neighborhood Improvement

Boost Neighborhood Activities and Clean Ups

OUTCOMES



Parks and amenities are true destinations



Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families



Tools & Activities

Neighborhood Improvement

Small House Reinvestment and Redevelopment Program

OUTCOMES



Parks and amenities are true destinations



What Union Park is already home to more community events than nearly any other Des Moines neighborhood. Maintain this active roster of events, align them as closely as possible to the neighborhood's vision and brand, and use them to reach a wider range of residents.

Translate engagement in neighborhood activities into participation in routine clean-up events that demonstrate pride through cleaner parks, alleys, and streets.

Why Family-friendliness and neighborliness are viewed as assets for the neighborhood, and well-designed events and activities can help build connections between families—making families more likely to see the neighborhood as their long-term home.

Activities also offer opportunities for resident leaders to get involved in tangible ways and put their organizing skills to good use for the community.

How The Union Park Neighborhood Association, working with other partners, can take a leadership role in curating existing activities to improve alignment with the neighborhood brand.

It can also take the lead, in partnership with Invest DSM and the City of Des Moines, in identifying potential targets for routine clean-up events.

Existing events and activities in the Union Park neighborhood include

- PorchFest DSM
- Union Park Easter Egg Hunt
- National Night Out
- Home Improvement Fair at Ding Darling Shelter
- Community Garden at Grand View University
- Longest Table at Grand View University
- Light Up the Carousel for the Holidays
- Dia De Los Muertos at Union Park
- Thompson Treat on Beggars' Night

What Expand ornamental plantings (such as flower beds) and enhance furnishings at the gateways and edges of Union Park and Birdland Park to express their status as destinations and improve the neighborhood's overall curb appeal.

Develop an updated park master plan for Union Park to help guide future landscape and pathway enhancements.

Why Union Park is one of Des Moines' original and "signature" parks, while Birdland Parks offers a high degree of riverfront access.

Both are well-positioned for special treatments that aid in establishing higher standards of maintenance neighborhood-wide.

Additional investments would also reinforce the recent refurbishment of the Rocket Slide and planned improvements at the Heritage Carousel.

How Initiate a funding and labor partnership between the Union Park Neighborhood Association, the City of Des Moines (Departments of Parks, Engineering, and Public Works), Invest DSM, Friends of Des Moines Parks, Heritage Carousel, and other partners to plan, built, and maintain enhanced park features.

Give Union Park priority status for future park master planning resources.

Existing gateway and signature features for Union Park provide a strong starting point for expansion



Ornamental beds from Union Park's early years provide an indication of what is possible with sufficient resources and partnerships in place



Tools & Activities

Neighborhood Improvement

Consider Additional Neighborhood Services at Birdland Park

OUTCOMES



What Explore the potential for additional neighborhood-oriented commercial space at Birdland Park through (1) the expansion of programming for the new Birdland Boathouse outlined in the Birdland Park and Marina Master Plan and (2) pop-up opportunities along the river.

Why There are limited opportunities for non-residential uses in the neighborhood, especially near the parks. The proposed reconstruction of the Birdland Boathouse, and other features of the park's master plan, provide a chance to consider additional services and uses.

How In the near-term, Des Moines Parks, the Neighborhood Association, and other local partners should explore the potential for vendor pop-up activities at the river that enhance the neighborhood's brand and the Birdland Park as a destination.

Longer-term, when the final design stages of the Birdland Boathouse expansion begin, use it to explore different programming possibilities.



Rendering of Birdland Boathouse Expansion from Birdland Park and Marina Master Plan



Tools & Activities

Neighborhood Improvement

Activate Small Neighborhood Commercial Opportunities

OUTCOMES



What While there are few neighborhood-oriented commercial uses adjacent to Union Park, there are a few properties that have potential to be activated or reactivated to provide space for a coffee shop, small restaurant, or other types of "third spaces" where residents can gather. These include former service stations and auto garages.

Why Creation of a few modern commercial spaces for neighborhood-oriented businesses and services has the potential to boost quality of life in the neighborhood by leveraging the presence of park visitors and the neighborhood's walkability.

How The City of Des Moines should recommend rezonings or conditional use permits as opportunities arise to activate vacant, formerly commercial spaces.

Invest DSM may consider use of its Commercial Grants Program to assist preparation of space for a business that strengthens residential life in the neighborhood.

Examples of Properties with Neighborhood-Oriented Commercial Potential on E. 9th Street



Tools & Activities

Neighborhood Improvement

Accelerate Alley and Sidewalk Improvements

OUTCOMES



Streets and alleys are safe and clean; they show that people care



Homes have an appealing combination of character and modern amenities

What

Alleys

Alleys in the SID will be the focus of a proactive sweep by the Department of Public Works in 2025 (grading the surface, trimming back overgrown vegetation, and other basic maintenance of the right-of-way) to bring them into a state of good repair.

Since alleys are the responsibility of private property owners, this 2025 sweep should be conducted in coordination with neighbors to convey the importance of ongoing and collaborative maintenance among those who share responsibility for alleys.

Sidewalks

Sidewalk conditions are also the responsibility of property owners. But the city's Sidewalk Repair Subsidy Program is available to assist income-eligible owners with the cost of repair. This program should be promoted to maximize its use in Union Park.

Why

The condition of alleys and sidewalks contributes to the neighborhood's overall condition and image. And it is indicative of the capacity of neighbors to show pride of place and ownership.

Improving alleys and sidewalks will be an important part of elevating standards in Union Park and making the most of the neighborhood's inherent walkability.

How

Department of Public Works and the Union Park Neighborhood Association should coordinate on the 2025 proactive sweep of alleys to raise awareness about property owner responsibilities and encourage ongoing collaborative maintenance.

The Department of Engineering, the neighborhood association, and Invest DSM should coordinate on active promotion of the Sidewalk Repair Subsidy Program.

Broken sidewalks, combined with alleys that have overgrown brush and dilapidated garages and fencing, send negative signals about neighborhood standards



Tools & Activities

Neighborhood Improvement

Strengthen and Maintain the Tree Canopy

OUTCOMES



Parks and amenities are true destinations



Streets and alleys are safe and clean; they show that people care



Families find great opportunities to plant roots alongside other families

What

Plant trees in any vacant tree spaces within the public right-of-way to achieve near-100% occupancy. Approximately 600 public tree spaces are currently vacant—or roughly 20% of available spaces.

Promote backyard tree planting and maintenance bolster the tree canopy on private properties.

Why

The existing tree canopy is viewed as an asset that makes the neighborhood especially charming and livable. Strengthening the canopy will maintain this asset while providing other proven benefits of trees (such as stronger property values, summer cooling efficiencies, and habitat for song birds)

How

Department of Forestry, Trees Forever, and Invest DSM to coordinate on resources and logistics for tree planting in the public right-of-way.

Those same partners, working with the Union Park Neighborhood Association, should also promote the importance of backyard trees and provide seasonal access to mini trees that are ready to plant.



Tools & Activities

Neighborhood Improvement

Make E. 14th Street a More Safe and Attractive Gateway

OUTCOMES



Parks and amenities are true destinations



Streets and alleys are safe and clean; they show that people care



- What** E. 14th Street (US 69) makes Union Park a convenient and accessible part of Des Moines. But at 17,800 vehicles per day, it also presents a series of challenges.
- It divides the Union Park neighborhood and can feel unsafe to pedestrians and drivers due to traffic exceeding the posted speed limit.
 - Due to traffic and noise, the single-family homes along the street (the corridor's largest land use) are more likely to be distressed and absentee-owned than those on interior blocks.
 - Traffic volumes are not conducive to pedestrian-scaled neighborhood commercial uses.
 - The highway atmosphere and blighted properties provide poor gateway imagery for the neighborhood and Grand View University.

The combination of conditions and limitations posed by this corridor require an incremental approach to making it safer and more attractive, as well as rethinking its long-term potential. Such an approach should be pursued over the next 10 years.

- Why** E. 14th Street is a necessary traffic conduit. But it and corridors similar to it are in need of re-thinking due to the incompatibility of current uses with a busy arterial roadways.
- While the street will continue as a busy arterial, there are opportunities to limit its negative impact on neighborhood safety, quality of life, and investment.
- There are also opportunities to leverage the presence of Grand View University and investments at key points along the corridor—including the proposed Greenleaf Center.

- How** **1 Street safety and aesthetic improvements**

IDOT, in partnership with the City of Des Moines, should identify and implement basic elements to improve the safety of pedestrians and transit users along E. 14th Street, including better crosswalks and higher-quality signal, lighting, and utility infrastructure.

- 2 Proactive blight abatement or removal**

The long-term pattern of disinvestment and absentee-ownership is likely to continue on the street, especially in the single-family housing supply. As opportunities emerge to acquire and demolish properties with considerable deferred maintenance—where the likelihood of the market delivering a positive outcome for the neighborhood is very low—the City of Des Moines and Invest DSM should partner to proactively acquire and abate or remove the source of blight.

- 3 Future land use plan for corridor**

The City of Des Moines should treat E. 14th Street as a test case for long-range land use planning on major corridors that pass through residential neighborhoods and have extensive single-family frontages. There may be blocks where single-family uses are viable in the long-term. But there are also blocks where a transition away from single-family uses will need to be carefully sequenced, and where future uses may include green buffers along the arterial and higher-intensity redevelopment near major intersections (mixed-use and multi-family).

- 4 'Opportunity Block' investments**

The future land use plan would provide guidance for investments on identified blocks where redevelopment and intensification make the most sense and can serve to further the vision of the Union Park Special Investment District by strengthening the area's residential appeal and expanding the range of neighborhood-oriented commercial services.

These "Opportunity Blocks" would require partnerships between the City of Des Moines, Invest DSM, local developers, and other neighborhood stakeholders to ensure positive neighborhood outcomes.

Implementation Summary

To successfully implement this plan over the next 10 years, the “how” matters as much as the “what.” Each activity or strategy will require some level of technical ability from the partners involved, but they will also require a willingness to do things differently, to learn from experience, to adapt when necessary, to tolerate risk, and to collaborate whenever possible to take advantage of the community’s collective wisdom and skills.

Getting the “how” right also means avoiding the impulse to treat each activity as a discrete task and losing sight of how everything fits together to achieve long-term neighborhood revitalization outcomes. For example, building resident leadership capacity and issuing housing rehab grants are very different activities but they are both critical to realizing a healthier neighborhood and should never be seen as unrelated undertakings.

Coalition Framework

Work in Des Moines’ Special Investment Districts since 2019 has followed a coalition model. In each SID, Invest DSM, the City of Des Moines, neighborhood associations, and an active steering committee of neighborhood stakeholders have convened on a regular basis to organize their work (using the SID plans as guides), prioritize activities, and fine-tune the implementation process over time. While the COVID pandemic posed challenges to this framework early on, it has succeeded at bringing a variety of perspectives, skillsets, and resources together to put the SID plans to work.

This same coalition framework should be pursued in the Union Park SID, bringing in other partners as needed to make headway on specific tasks. **This coalition should convene quarterly to:**

- Review progress on components of the action plan
- Modify actions as needed to reflect new information
- Track outcome indicators
- Track changes in the housing market to identify challenges to affordability and plan appropriate interventions to preserve affordable options for vulnerable households
- Respond to new challenges and opportunities in ways that align with the neighborhood’s vision and core brand attributes, as well as Des Moines’ neighborhood revitalization principles



RESOURCES

Implementation of the action plan will require funding from a range of public sector partners to support the emergence of a healthier neighborhood where the market is strong, capacity is high, conditions are appealing, and the image is positive. In other words, the public investment is about building peoples’ confidence to invest their own time, energy, and money into the neighborhood, resulting in a more competitive and financially sustainable community over time.

In the same way that “how” matters to the implementation of individual activities and strategies, the nature and diversity of resources matters, too. The commitment of local funding to this effort, exemplified by the city and county dedications to Invest DSM, is a statement about priorities and values—about not waiting for someone else to solve a problem. The vast majority of the resources identified by this action plan are local in nature and reflect the breadth of implementation partnerships.

ACTIONS

Housing Reinvestment and Opportunity

Promote Block Challenge Grant Program

Promote Homeowner Renovation and Single-Family Developer Programs

Begin Proactive Focus on Small House Reinvestment

Create Contractor’s Network for Sensitive Rehab

Neighborhood Improvement

Boost Neighborhood Activities and Clean Ups

Improve Park Features to Enhance Destination Status

Consider Additional Neighborhood Services at Birdland Park

Activate Small Neighborhood Commercial Opportunities

Accelerate Alley and Sidewalk Improvements

Strengthen and Maintain the Tree Canopy

Make E. 14th Street a More Safe and Attractive Gateway

	RESOURCES				
	City of Des Moines	Invest DSM	State and Federal Resources	Private: Homeowners, Investors, Businesses, Institutions	Time and Energy of Residents, including Neighborhood Association
Promote Block Challenge Grant Program		✓		✓	✓
Promote Homeowner Renovation and Single-Family Developer Programs		✓		✓	
Begin Proactive Focus on Small House Reinvestment	✓	✓		✓	
Create Contractor’s Network for Sensitive Rehab		✓		✓	✓
Boost Neighborhood Activities and Clean Ups	✓			✓	✓
Improve Park Features to Enhance Destination Status	✓			✓	✓
Consider Additional Neighborhood Services at Birdland Park	✓			✓	
Activate Small Neighborhood Commercial Opportunities	✓	✓		✓	
Accelerate Alley and Sidewalk Improvements	✓			✓	
Strengthen and Maintain the Tree Canopy	✓	✓		✓	✓
Make E. 14th Street a More Safe and Attractive Gateway	✓	✓	✓	✓	