

*Revised: August 26, 2010*



# Southwest Rockford Charrette Report

Rockford, Illinois

Charrette: April 18-19, 2008

**AIA NI**

American Institute of Architects Northern Illinois

**Pilgrim's Promise**

Community Development Corporation

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# Acknowledgments

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## AIA NORTHERN ILLINOIS TEAM

Joseph W. Anderson, AIA, *Anderson McInnis Architects*

Jennifer McInnis, AIA, *Anderson McInnis Architects*

Gary W. Anderson, AIA, *Gary W. Anderson & Associates Architects*

David A. Sidney, AICP, *Gary W. Anderson & Associates Architects*

Jeffrey Flemming, AIA, *Rockford Associates Planners + Architects*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rockford Park District

City of Rockford, Mayor's Office

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King's Table II Catering

Southwest Rockford Ideas for Tomorrow Today (SWIFTT)

U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD)

University of Illinois College of Medicine

Rockford Area Economic Development Council (RAEDC)

Chicago Rockford International Airport

Pilgrim Baptist Church

Pilgrim's Promise Community Development Corporation

Rockford Mass Transit District (RMTD)

# Introduction

In August 2007, Pilgrim's Promise Community Development Corporation (CDC) envisioned a public dialogue to aid in the organizations efforts to meet health, social, financial, and physical environment needs in south Rockford. In partnership with the American Institute of Architects of Northern Illinois (AIA NI), the CDC and AIA NI led a two-day (April 18-19) community design charrette with Southwest Rockford as the boundary study area. This partnership created linkages between public sector agencies, private business owners, real estate development organizations, architects, designers and planners. Participation by neighborhood organizations and residents was also critical to the success of the event. AIA NI and the CDC established the goal to merge multiple and sometimes competing visions into one unified vision.



## Overview

On April 18 and 19, Southwest Rockford residents, business owners, professionals, and city, state and federal officials took part in an intensive two-day urban design charrette at the Chicago Rockford International Airport Auditorium. Approximately 50 people participated in the charrette.

The successful outcome demonstrated the efforts of the core leadership team with AIA NI to reach consensus among differences of opinions. All participants agreed to the need to leverage the areas strengths and find new opportunities to have lasting impact on neighborhood revitalization and growth.

## Why a Charrette

### PILGRIM'S PROMISE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Pilgrim's Promise began in 2007 with a mission to improve the economic and physical environment of neighborhoods in Southwest Rockford. Our organization sees value in understanding the larger vision, setting clear goals, achievable outcomes, and measuring results. With this in mind, we feel it is important to be an agent to encourage a unified vision for Southwest Rockford. Our organization hopes to identify key opportunities that align with our mission to aid in the overall development and redevelopment of southwest Rockford.



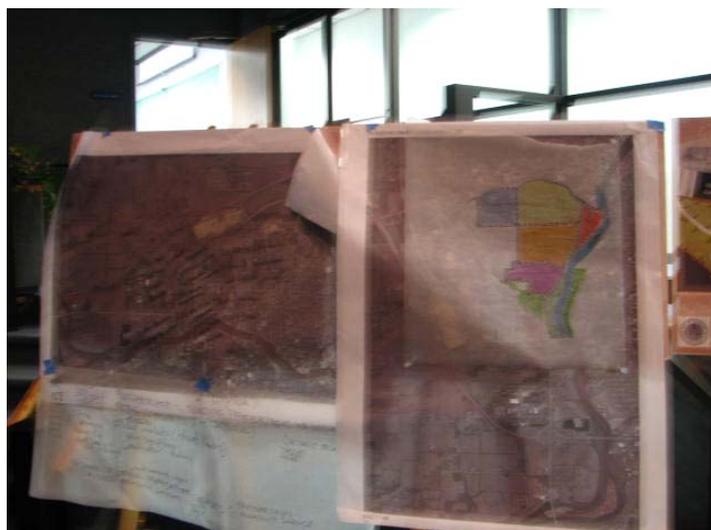
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## American Institute of Architects (AIA Northern Illinois)

The AIA Northern Illinois' mission is "Improving the quality of the build environment by further raising the standards of architectural education, training and practice; fostering design excellence and promoting the value of architectural services to the public." Our mission will certainly be served through our involvement in community design charrette and planning sessions such as this, and by providing vision and direction within our community. Our Partnership in this event is intended to be a catalyst for future sessions and show the community we are a willing, able, and uniquely qualified resource for leadership and vision.

### Vision and Goal

The CDC and AIA NI agreed to establish the southwest quadrant of Rockford as the focus area for the charrette. Bounded by the river to the east, downtown to the north, U.S Bypass 20 to the west, and the Chicago Rockford International Airport to the south, the group agreed to identify multiple nodes that enhance neighborhood vibrancy, opportunities for shopping, working, and living, and ways to enhance connection to surrounding areas.



# The Charrette

## Day One

The group began with a one hour bus tour of the study area (See Tour Route Map) to highlight the history, current trends, and key focus areas for charrette participants to think about during the two-day dialogue and planning session.

After the bus tour, participants were immersed in past, current and future demographic and economic trends for southwest Rockford and the broader Rockford metropolitan area. Led by Joel Cowen with the University of Illinois College of Medicine, and Janyce Fadden, Executive Director of Rockford Area Economic Development Council, the group began to understand the real conditions, challenges, and opportunities for growth with southwest Rockford.

After the morning presentations, participants subdivided into four teams to work through strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the charrette focus area. During the fifty (50) minutes, each team identified.

During the afternoon sessions, each group focused on corridors (connectivity) and neighborhoods (nodes). Each group identified the following common themes:

- Balance nature and recreation with commerce and transportation along the river and S. Main Street.
- Increase entertainment and festival opportunities.
- Need for infrastructure improvements to South Main and other major roads
- Attract private investors to redevelop key commercial intersections.
- Strengthen the connections between commercial corridors and neighborhoods through sidewalks, bike, and physical neighborhood identification.
- Commercial corridors should incorporate residential and office space where physical and economically viable



## Day Two

The group reconvened on day two to review the S.W.O.T. analysis that occurred the previous day to define key target areas for physical improvements and guiding principles for development/redevelopment. At the end of the morning session, three (3) catalytic focus emerged as key areas for overall southwest quadrant development and redevelopment opportunities.

The afternoon session further defined guiding principles, development/redevelopment opportunities, and suggested implementation strategies for the three (3) catalytic areas.

# Big Ideas

During the charrette, the group emerged with several key guiding principles for the vision. In general, people described the area as ripe for growth, accessible by automobile, bus, and walking, and strategically located to downtown and other parts of the city. The following guiding principles emerged:

## Walkable Streets

- Expand sidewalks and bike trail within commercial districts and along the river
- Provide tree-lined streets
- Connect streets with parks, green and open space
- Provide on-street parking where possible
- Change the character of South Main Street to include boulevards and “pedestrian” friendly street furniture

## Promote Re-use, Redevelopment, and Infill

- Preserve existing buildings within commercial districts
- Preserve and enhance Barber-Colman site
- Promote construction for vacant parcels

### Promote ethnic/racial make-up

- The past and present ethnic and racial groups within the study area is very diverse and should be promoted
- Expand cultural activities and events
- Encourage neighborhood identification

### Provide greater housing choice

- Provide new housing at a price point for existing residents.
- Balance housing construction to discourage overwhelming gentrification of neighborhoods
- Provide opportunities for multi-family, townhouse, and single-family houses along the river and within existing neighborhoods.

### Establish key employment areas

- Encourage industrial and heavy commercial employment areas to develop around the Chicago Rockford International Airport and U.S. Bypass 20.
- Enhance and attract locally owned businesses to the South Main Street Corridor.

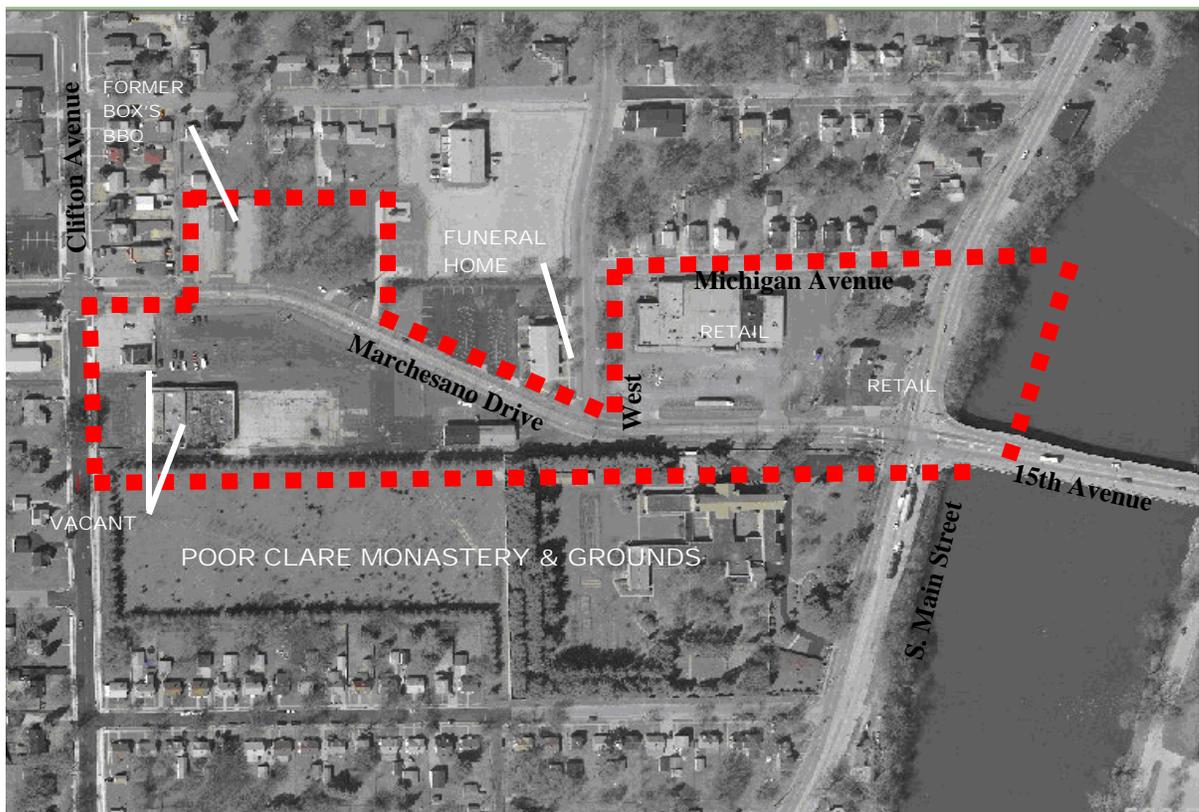


# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #1—Main & Marchesano

The catalytic project area is bounded by the Poor Clare Monastery to the south, the Rock River to the east, Clifton Avenue to the west and Michigan and Marchesano to the north. The intersection of Main and Marchesano is considered the epicenter of the historical Rockford Italian American community. Many residents also recall the former Box's Barbeque drive in restaurant as a social hub the entire neighborhood, particularly the African American community. The Poor Clare Corpus Christi Monastery, with its meticulously maintained grounds, has served as a stabilizing anchor to this area since 1916. The Gasparini & Oliveri Funeral Home has also served as a landmark since 1931. Existing uses include retail and commercial buildings. Once a thriving social and retail hub for the neighborhood— several vacant buildings currently exist. Physical and visual access to the Rock River is limited due to grade change and vegetation.

### Existing Conditions



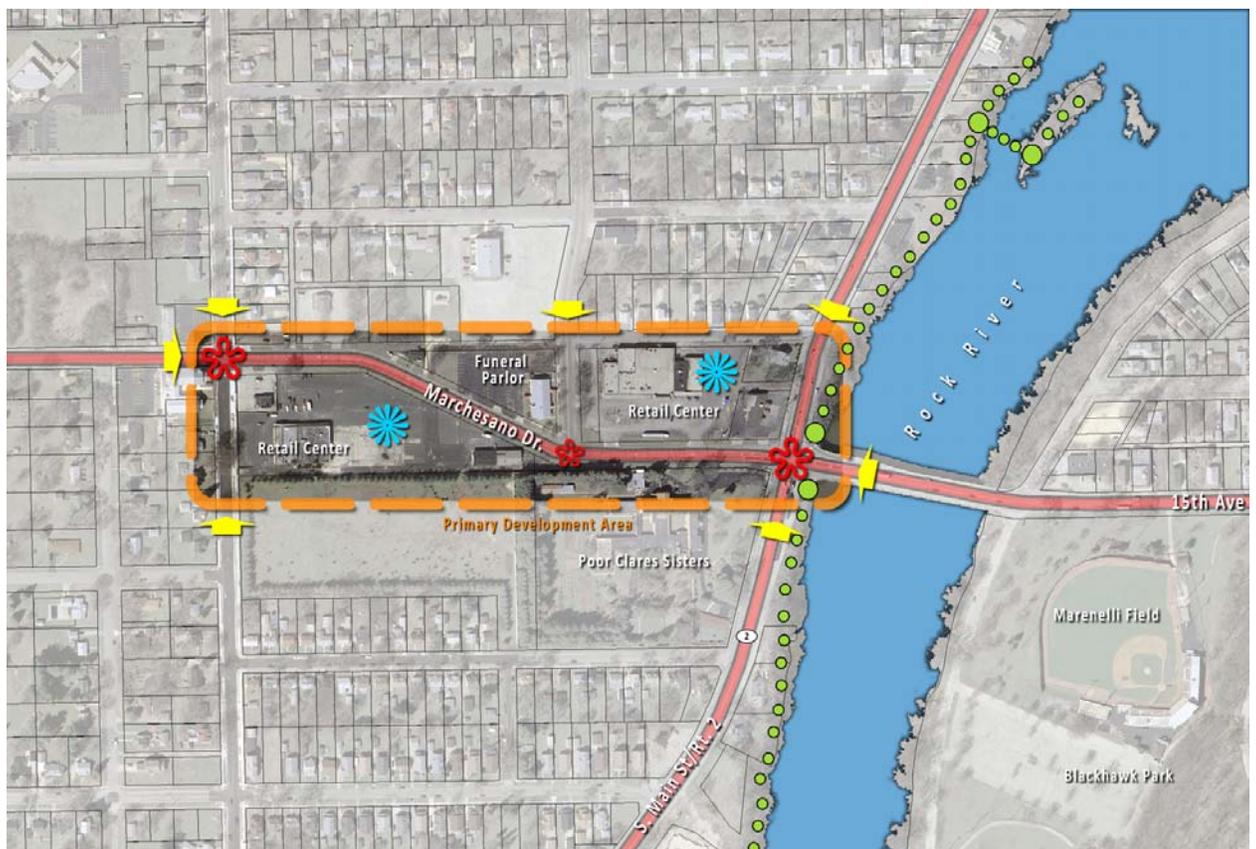
# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #1—Main & Marchesano

This catalytic project area represents a direct connection from the surrounding neighborhoods to our communities greatest asset, the Rock River. Evaluating need, a mixed use area with expanded retail, daily living services, and reinvestment would bring compounding benefits to the neighborhood, to a major entrance corridor to our city, and to the rivers edge.

1. Capitalize on major corridor intersection, Rt 2/South Main St.
2. Capitalize on direct neighborhood connections.
2. Pedestrian Connection to Riverfront/River Walk.
3. Neighborhood based retail and daily living services  
i.e. farmers market, laundry, etc.
4. Capitalize on mixed and elderly housing need.

## Opportunities



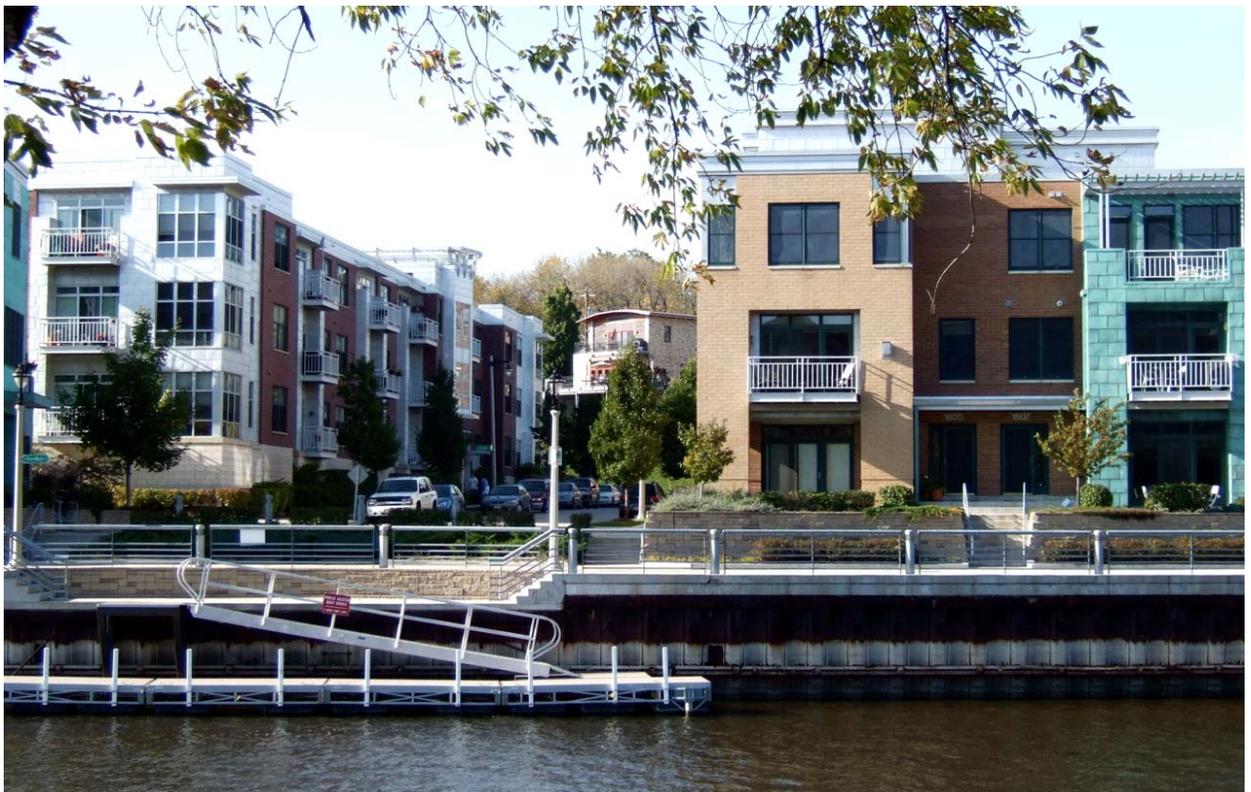
# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #1—Main & Marchesano—Images



*Photos herein courtesy of Congress for New Urbanism Image Bank*

1. Example of Community Market Structure
2. Depicts access and usable green space adjacent to riverfront
3. Example of access to waterway



# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #2—Intersection of Morgan & Main Streets

Bounded by Kent Creek to the north and Montague Street to the south, in many ways this particular catalytic area is considered a distinctly urban center for southwest Rockford. Walkable and varied in use, this stretch of the South Main corridor—specifically north and south of Morgan street axis, the urban fabric and street wall is well defined with density and small set backs. The Ethnic Heritage Museum, Graham-Ginestra and Tinker Swiss Cottage Home Museums and the old Rialto Theatre are some of the unique historical and cultural assets that give this area its distinctive identity. Various retail businesses catering to the Hispanic community now occupy the storefront properties along Main Street. A grocery store development, which was constructed in 2002, is now under new ownership and markets and caters toward the Hispanic community. A new retail project adjacent to the grocery store currently under construction. Invariably, the most influential factor for this catalytic area this area will be the fate of the development of the old Barber Colman site.

### Existing Conditions—Overall Large Scale Aerial



# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #2—Intersection of Morgan & Main Streets





# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #2—Intersection of Morgan & Main Streets— Images



*Photos courtesy of Congress for New Urbanism Image Bank*

1. Example of new infill mixed use development
2. Example of new residential development with higher urban density
3. Pedestrian friendly, urban, walk up townhomes

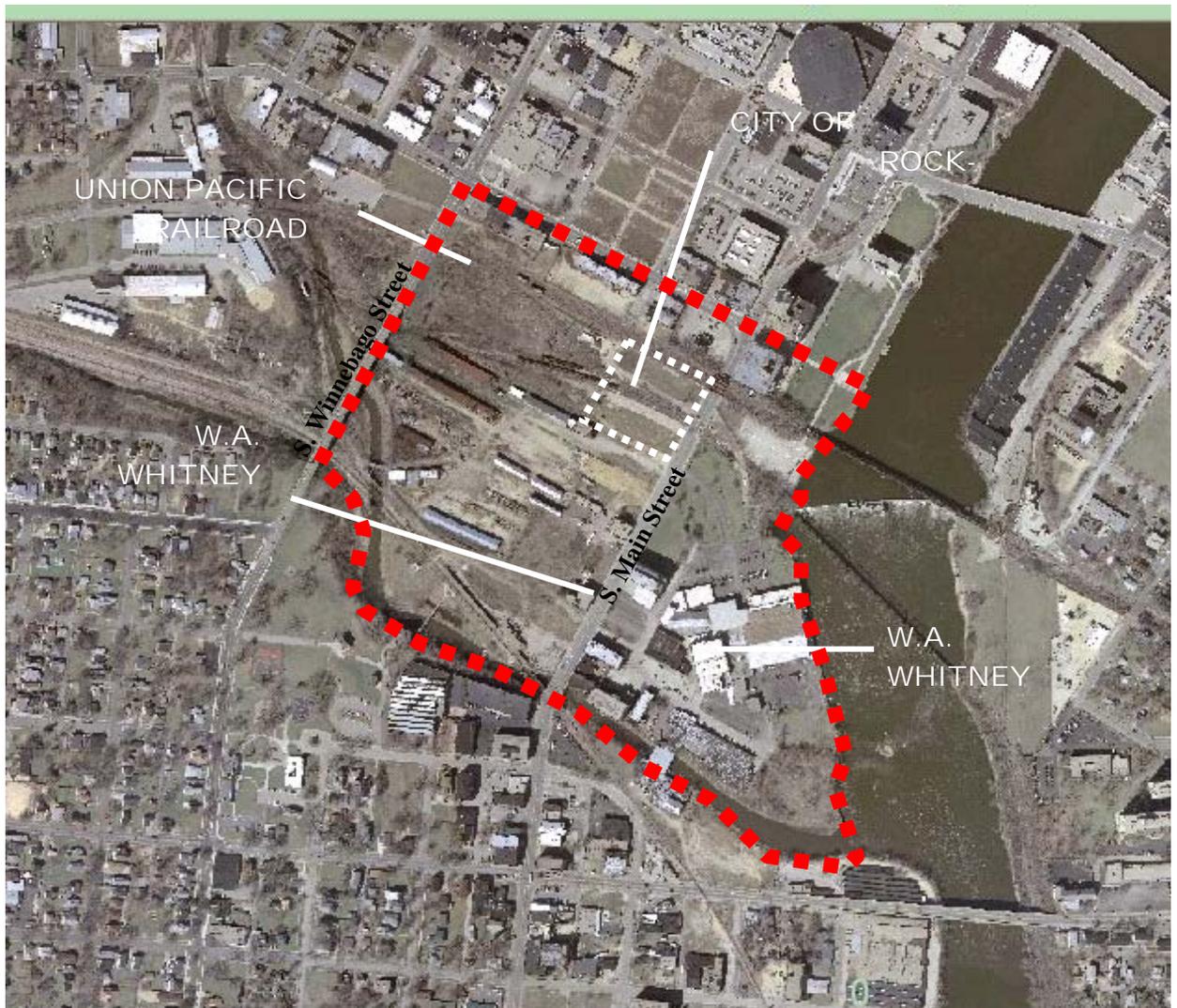


# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #3—Railroad Yards

The railroad yard catalytic site poses multiple layers of challenges and importance. As it currently stands, the railroad yards is a blighted stigma as one approaches downtown, however large scale and long term opportunity abounds with plans for a mass transit depot. The Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative (NICTI) is currently conducting a study in order to seek federal funds to design or build a new transit service. The goal of the Alternatives Analysis Study is to identify a Local Preferred Alternative (LPA) for public transportation providing an efficient, affordable, and attractive link between the Boone/Winnebago and Chicagoland Regions. East of Main Street to the Rock River is industrial use and parking. The bend in to river, the gateway to downtown and the underutilization of this boundary make it exceptionally ripe for development.

### Existing Conditions—Overall Large Scale Aerial



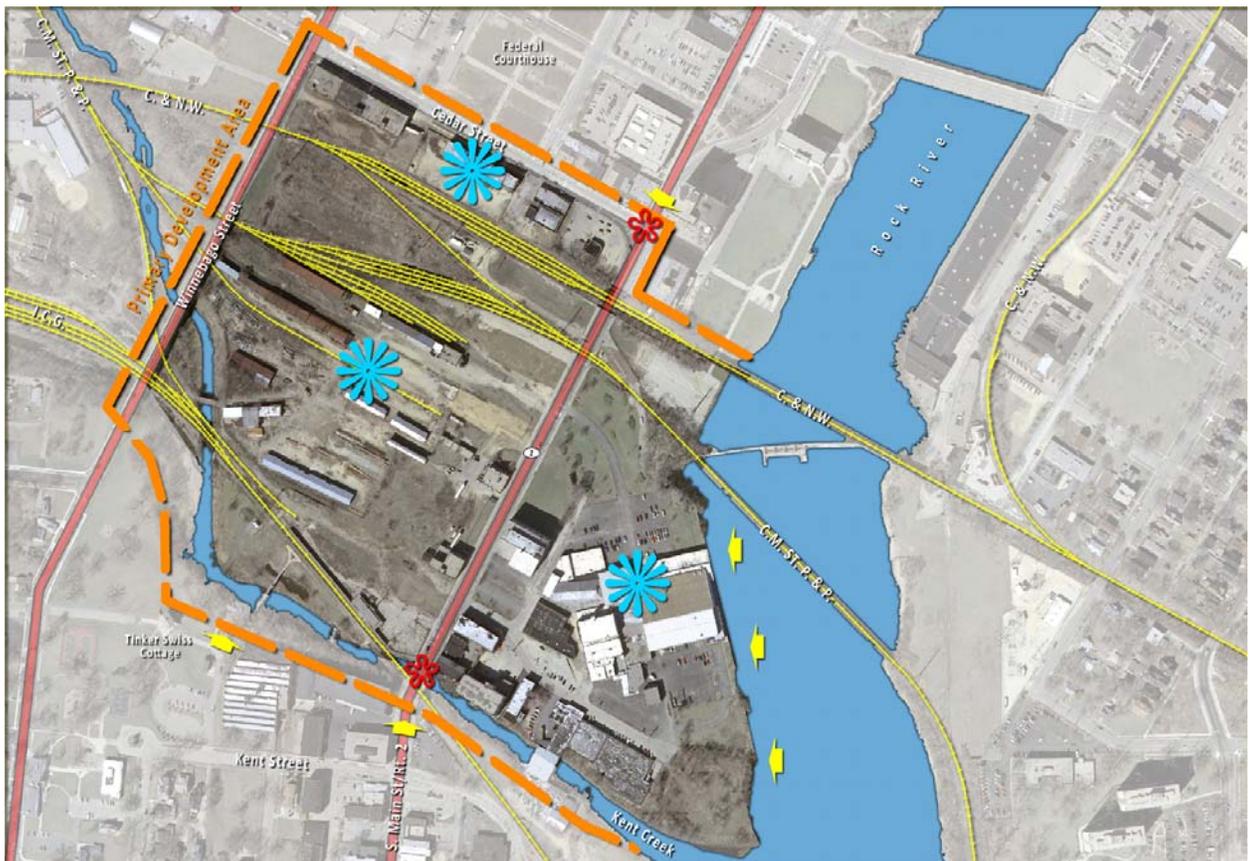
# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #3—Railroad Yards

The Rail Yards offer a multitude of opportunities from regional and local transportation hub, via proposed Amtrak stop and light rail connecting downtown to the Chicago/Rockford International Airport. Proximity to downtown and the river's edge make this a prime location for a convention/civic center, hotels, a community athletics stadium, university campus, multiple recreational uses, and riverfront housing.

1. Capitalize on transportation connections.
2. Capitalize on location, location, location; Downtown, Rivers edge, etc.
3. Reinforce the "Gateway" concept regionally and locally.

## Opportunities



# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #3—Railroad Yards (Existing)



# Prioritization Areas

## Catalytic Area #3—Railroad Yards (Images)

*Photos courtesy of flickr.com*



1. View looking north to railroad trestle and W. A. Whitney
2. Existing abandoned railroad Depot
3. Existing abandoned railroad Depot
4. Existing railroad tracks



# Action Plan

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## **Action Plan**

Many tools are needed for an action plan to succeed. These development components will create opportunities for growth and future development. The following components bring an asset that strengthens and adds value to the neighborhood. The proposed public investment in South Main Street must be supported by design excellence, positive attitude, a supportive culture and private investment.

### **Purpose:**

The successful redevelopment of any neighborhood is the result of recognizing and responding to the elements and conditions that foster a positive image. Buildings serve as representatives in the physical sense that identifies place, neighborhoods and community. Primary streets, such as South Main Street, serve as a front yard to the adjoining neighborhoods. That streetscape offers details that define character, quality and value of the environment, not only on the street but also for what is behind it. It can leave a good or bad impression, real or perceived. Negative attitudes compound the problem that fuel helplessness and offers no vision for the future.

## **Communication**

Southwest Rockford is home to several neighborhoods, cultural groups and organizations—each having their own unique identity, history and character. A repeating theme at the workshop was the idea of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. How do these groups work in concert effectively on common goals and issues? The answer over and over, came back to simple communication. Clearly, the dialogue of “big ideas” has begun and is important. At the same time as these overall plans are developed, the area neighborhoods and civic groups need to collectively work together to support the common SW Rockford District goals. It is not only a primary goal is to establish effective communication and clearly defined common goals between the residents and stakeholders in the geographical area, but also with the various governmental agencies. From access to project schedules, contact information of organization leaders to a current framework plan—how effectively information is distributed to stakeholders is critical to the success of any long or short term development plan.

Below is a synopsis of the current lead organizations and social centers that exist, which are defined not only by areas, but also culture and ideals:

### **Community Development Groups:**

Comprehensive Community Solutions; Pilgrim’s Promise Community Development Corporation; S.W.I.F.T.T. (Southwest Ideas for Today and Tomorrow); Youthbuild Community Development Program

### **Ethnic & Cultural Centers:**

Ethnic Heritage Museum; Booker T. Washington Center; Klehm Arboretum; St. Elizabeth Center

### **Businesses:**

Al-Mar Floral, GC; Kurt’s Auto; La Familia grocery store; Lowe’s Distribution Center; Morgan & Main; Marchesano & Main district

# Action Plan

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## Recommendations:

Capitalize on opportunities to communicate in order to provide a united vision and clear communication of common goals. Take cue from existing groups that are structured to foster relationships and communication:

### **Neighborhood Network**

Neighborhood Network is an organization that provides support services, technical assistance, and encouragement Rockford area neighborhood associations. Neighborhood Network is valuable resource to tap to help strengthen communication on a neighborhood level. By providing opportunities for neighborhood leaders to share, listen and inspire is a key factor to strengthening community associations. The benefit and tips that NN is able to provide with regard to organizing a neighborhood association will invariably positively affect everything from community pride, property values and neighborhood concerns to safety.

## Design Guidelines

Revitalizing neighborhoods places an emphasis on appearances, amenities, and functional planning. Good design provides marketable and visible choices that retain identity and a sense of belonging.

Southwest Rockford has many symbols of good design in housing, schools, industry and commercial buildings. Retention and enhancement of these valuable assets are critical building blocks for the future. They define the unique neighborhood. Redevelopment of vacant or deteriorated properties can be detrimental if good design values are not used.

Strong design choices are the backbone of livable and sustainable neighborhoods. New faceless buildings can have the same effect as old broken down buildings. Quality design is essential for a strong and viable future. Encouraging the use of design guidelines to enhance new development has been very successful throughout the country.

Our new Zoning Ordinance has provided a new tool to provide quality design. Urban overlay districts can also be a tool to encourage good design especially on major thoroughfares or significant areas of interest. The purpose of these guidelines is to guide new development and provide sensitivity to the neighborhood and its assets.

These design guidelines can insure the compatibility of new buildings with respect to the character of their immediate neighbors. They should encourage adaptive reuse and sensitive rehabilitation of existing historic structures. They can protect and enhance the economic viability of the area while encouraging the diversity of uses and activities in the neighborhood.

Design guidelines can be formulated with community input through a charrette process. The pros and cons and the values of adopting such guidelines and enhancing and improving the area can be discussed in an open forum.

# Action Plan

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## **Recommendations:**

Southwest Rockford Neighborhood should take a leadership role in establishing design guidelines for the South Main Corridor. These guidelines should be adopted by the City of Rockford to insure future quality improvements.

### **Neighborhood Identification**

Signage is an important element in identifying neighborhoods. Maintaining quality signs provides continuity for residents, encourages cohesiveness and serves as landmarks for those that pass by. Historic landmarks and districts should be identified and promoted as assets of the neighborhood with signage. Landmark and neighborhood signage provides identity, ownership, character and a source of pride for the neighbors.

### **Planned Infrastructure Improvements**

Planning was recently completed for improvements along South Main Street from the airport to downtown. This proposed plan creates a boulevard and provides amenities to enhance one of the most beautiful entrances to downtown. It will serve as one of the major entrances into the community and provide a positive influence on the neighborhood and the downtown area. It will open new views to the Rock River, and emphasize landmark buildings as positive attributes to a new greenway.

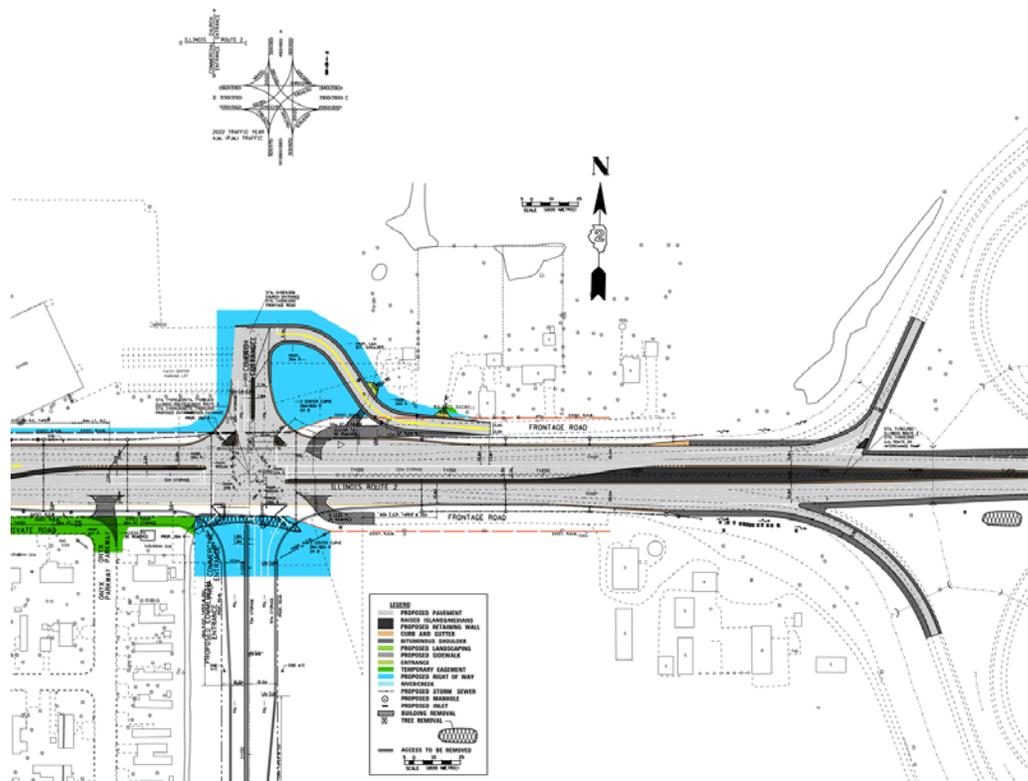
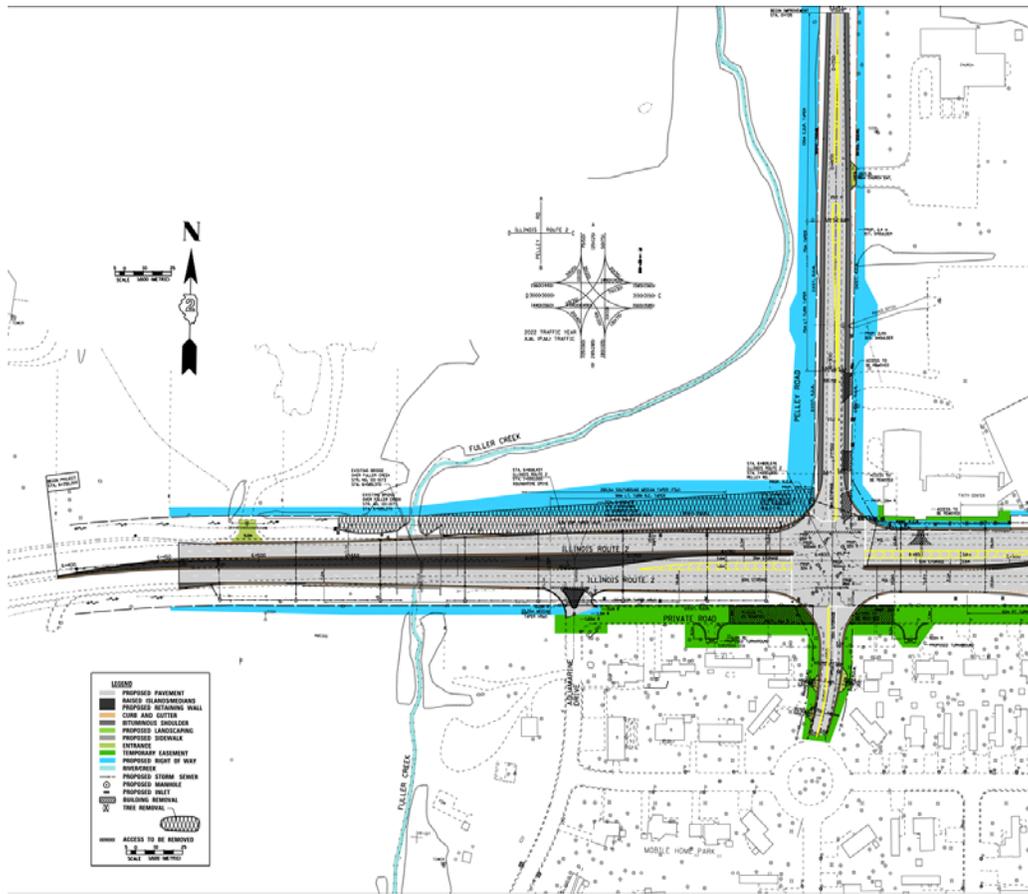
A new river walk and bikeway will provide a recreational asset to enhance the livability of the area. It will also serve to connect neighborhoods, downtown, landmark sites and structures to the Rock River. The new road design will provide limited access to Main Street from adjacent neighborhoods to enhance safety. Funding is currently being held up without a State of Illinois Capital Improvement Plan.

### **Planned Neighborhood Street Improvements**

The City of Rockford recently enacted a 1% sales tax that will provide funding for Capital Improvements to all neighborhood streets. These improvements will happen over the next five years and have been included in this packet of information.

It is common knowledge that good streets, curb, gutters and sidewalks enhance and define the edges of a neighborhood. This investment encourages adjacent landowners to improve their properties as well. A street full of potholes and broken curbs encourages disinvestment in the neighborhood. Streetlights can also enhance the look and feel of a neighborhood during the day while providing pedestrian safety at night. Improving streets is critical for the public sector to enhance opportunities for private investment. In the early 1990's the City made street light improvements in the South Main Street commercial area that improved the appearance of the adjoining buildings and neighborhoods.

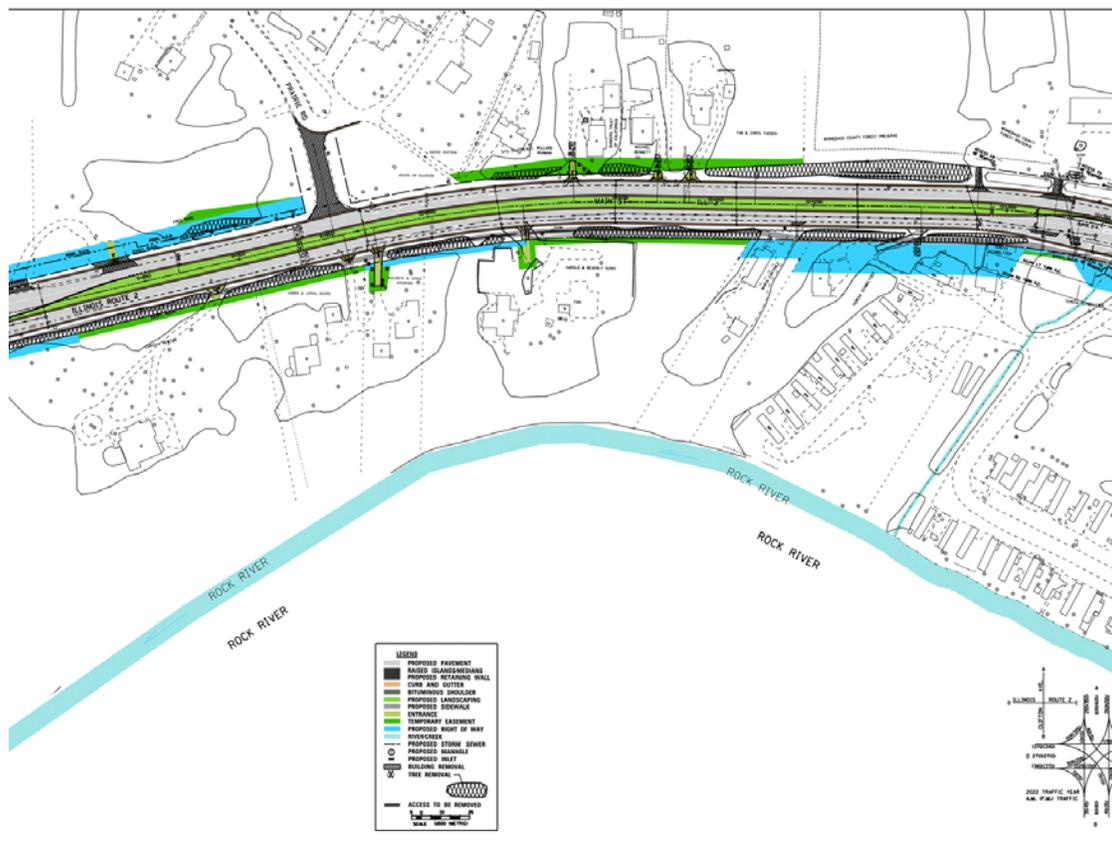
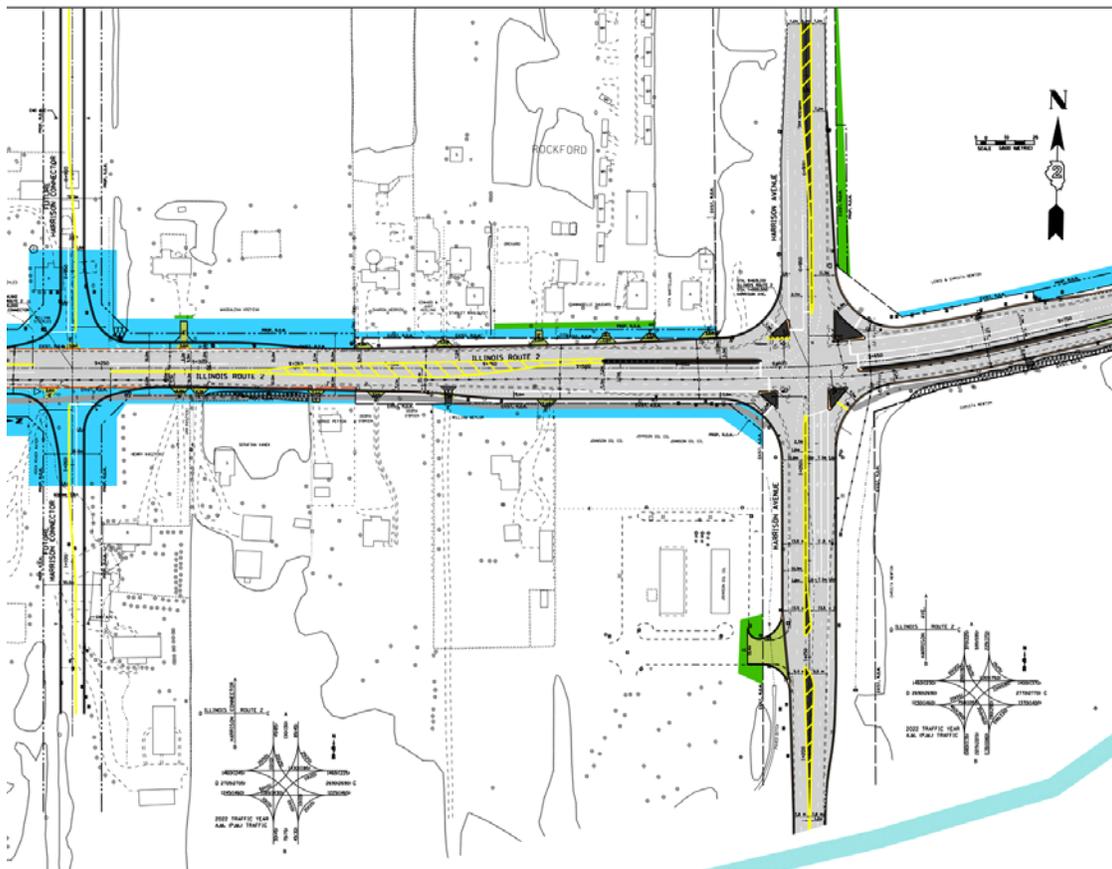
# Appendix—Maps of Planned South Main Street Improvements



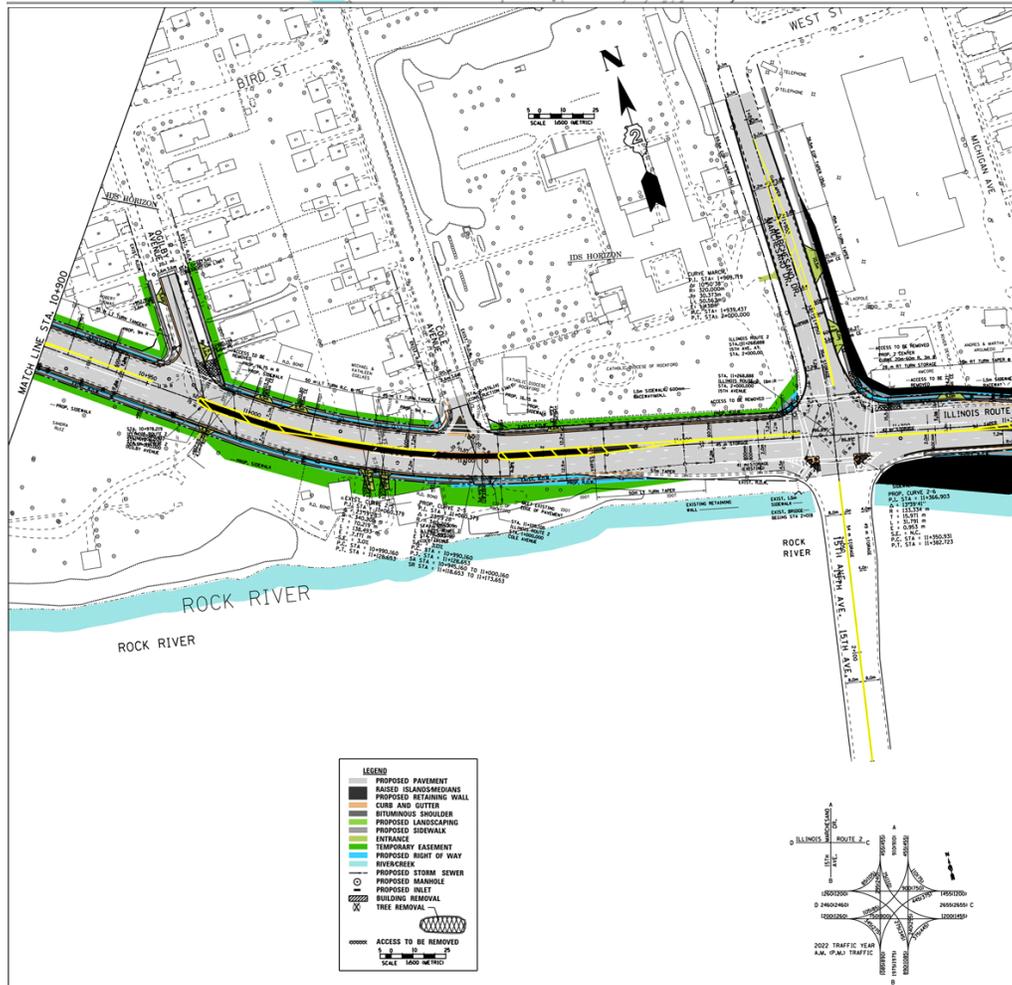
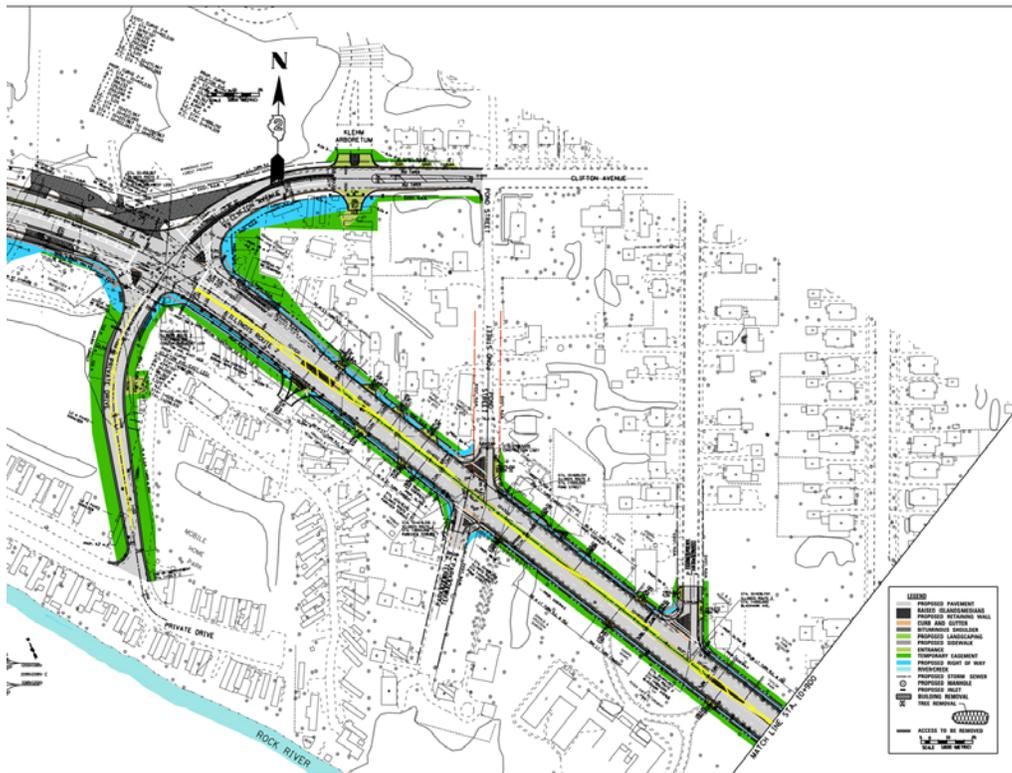
Planned South Main Street Improvements maps courtesy of Illinois Department of Transportation



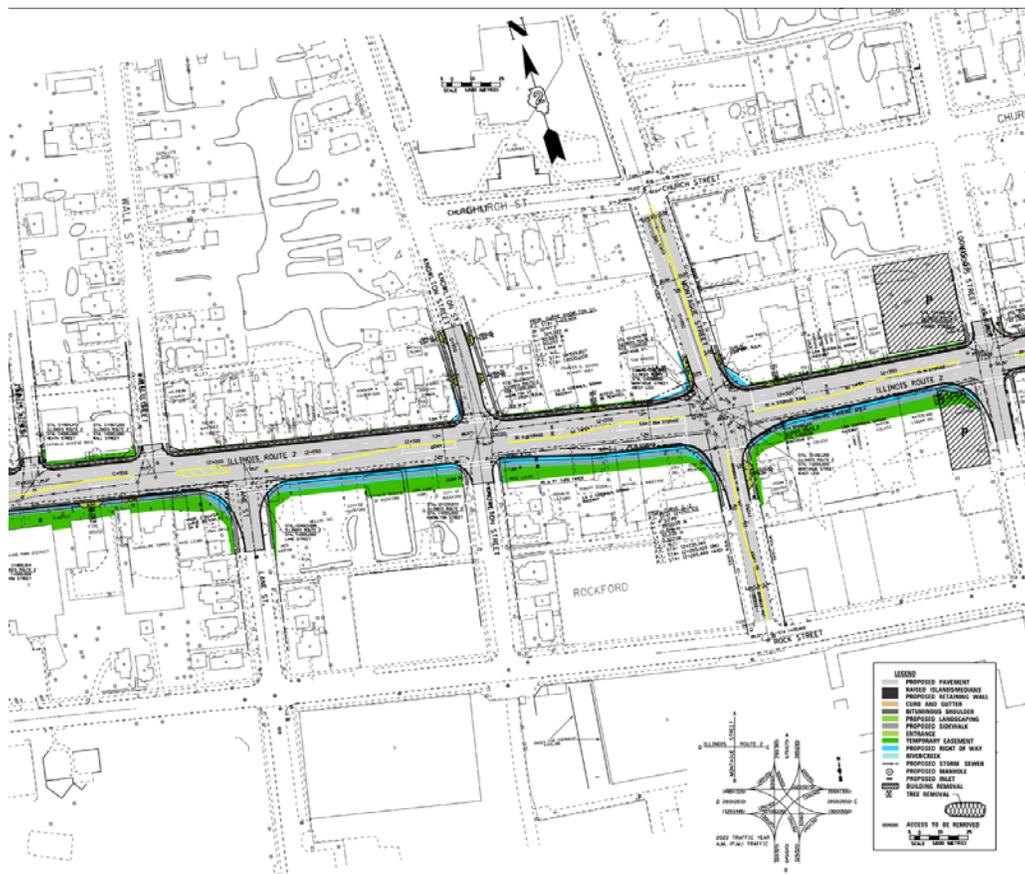
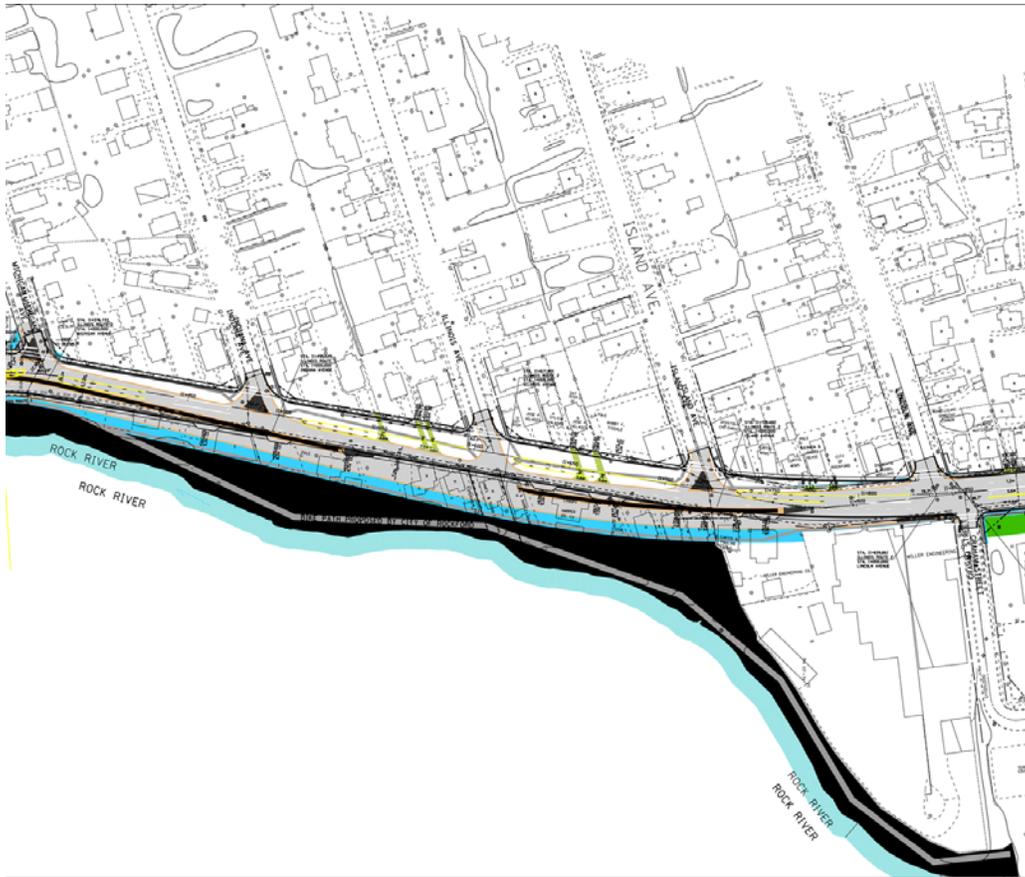
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