

MINIMUM HEIGHT AND FLOOR AREA RATIO STANDARDS IN THE DOWNTOWN SERVICE CENTER (DSC) ZONING DISTRICT

July 31, 2018

BACKGROUND:

City Council held a workshop concerning Downtown Visioning on June 17, 2018. At the conclusion of the workshop, City Council requested a staff report specifically addressing minimum two-story height and 1.0 Floor Area Ratio (FAR) standards for DSC zoning and a separate staff report from the Transportation Division on the scope of a comprehensive parking study for Downtown. City Council stated an intent to revisit the issues of development standards, public amenities (plaza), public parking, and development incentives originally described within the November 14, 2017 staff report after reviewing the requested staff reports.

This staff report addresses background information on the DSC zoning standards that require a new development to be constructed at a minimum of two-stories and with a minimum 1.0 Floor Area Ratio. **City Council specifically requested information on how the standards may vary for properties not located along Main Street.** The belief by Council at the workshop was the two-story standard should remain in place along Main Street, but to investigate if other options are appropriate for other areas of Downtown. Staff notes that City Council recently adopted Downtown Gateway Zoning for the 100 Block of Kellogg Avenue that included a requirement for two-story buildings, but no FAR requirement. This block of Kellogg was previously zoned DSC.

DSC zoning currently applies to 146 properties with approximately 70% of the total properties having a two-story building and 30% with either a one-story building or a surface parking lot. All new construction must meet the minimum two-story building height and 1.0 FAR requirement, including additions to existing buildings. Additionally, a property cannot be used solely for surface parking without a building as the minimum intensity for use of a property is a 1.0 FAR. Each property that does not have a building that meets minimum height and/or the FAR is considered a nonconforming structure. Nonconforming structures have limitations on the degree of changes allowed before complying with all standards.

The current standards were adopted in 2000 to further the objectives for the DSC area identified within the LUPP for DSC to be the most intense area of development of the city and to ensure new development is of the same character as the current surroundings. Specifically, Goal 8 addresses Downtown and the Urban Core Policies section of Chapter 2 describe the expected intensity as 1.0 FAR for the traditional Downtown Area (See Attachment 3 & 4) Additionally, the LUPP describes the intent to preserve older buildings and support their reuse versus their demolition and replacement. No new buildings have been constructed Downtown since adoption of the standard.

However, dozens of buildings have been remodeled with and without Downtown Façade Grants.

City Council reviewed the minimum building standards as an informational item in 2011 at the time the 100 block of Kellogg was rezoned to DSC, but no direction was given to change requirements at that time. From the review of the 2011 staff report and P&Z minutes, there was no consensus on providing relief to the 2-story requirement versus maintaining high standards. City Council created an exception process in 2016 for certain non-commercial uses, described more fully below. Staff has been approached in the past three years by three different commercial property owners considering either redeveloping their site or doing an addition to a building; however, their projects were complicated, at least in part, by the requirements of minimum FAR and two-stories and they did not proceed. Each of these sites were business/operator owned properties with an intent to meet the current business’s needs and not as a developer seeking high levels of redevelopment potential.

Minimum FAR and height standards work together to ensure a consistent two-story appearance of buildings. Although the standards are related, each standard addresses separate design interests and have independent utility. FAR is a measurement of intensity of use with the amount of floor area related to lot size. FAR does not directly result in a minimum building height unless the FAR standard exceeds 1.0. In comparison, a minimum two-story building height requirement ensures two floors of use and a consistent look, but does not address the overall amount of building floor area on a lot. The smaller a lot the more likely the two standards reach the same result and the larger the lot the more likely the standards diverge and have different results

The City employs minimum building standards in five other zoning districts. The following table describes the requirements for other zones.

Zoning District	Minimum FAR	Minimum Height
DSC (Downtown Service Center)	1.00	2-stories
CSC (Campustown Service Center)	1.00	25 feet
DGC (Downtown Gateway Commercial)	NA	2-stories (Kellogg Only)
RI (Research Park Innovation Dist.)	NA	2-stories (Hub area only)
Village- Mixed Use/Shop House	NA	2-stories
Village- Com./Shop Front	NA	16 feet

Some exemptions are afforded to specific development types with DSC and CSC. City Council enacted an exemption in 2016 for the CSC and DSC zoning districts that allow for uses that require a Special Use Permit to be approved when “...a proposed use and design is compatible in character with its surrounding and is exempt from meeting minimum FAR and minimum height.” The applicability of this exemption is narrow in scope as the types of uses include, religious institutions, funeral facilities, and other institutional use types. To date, this exemption has been approved three times to allow

for an addition to a church, remodeling of a funeral home, and construction of an accessory garage for a church.

However, there is also an exception process available for any use in CSC and DSC in regards to meeting the minimum 2-story requirement as part of Section 29.808 (4) and 29.809 (4) of the Zoning Ordinance. The exception standard is a high bar that may be approved by the ZBA when it determines the following:

1. *Physical circumstances exist for the property which result in a lot with a size and shape that is not conducive to a multi-story structure, and*
2. *It can be demonstrated that there is a direct benefit to the community to have a one-story structure, at the proposed location, as opposed to a multi-story structure.*

OPTIONS:

DSC zoning includes standards that in combination promote a traditional walkable downtown area. These standards include no parking between the building and the street, no on-site parking requirements for commercial and office uses, minimum building height of two stories, and minimum intensity of 1.0 FAR, and mixed use is allowed when commercial is on the ground floor. **Any change to these core standards needs to be weighed against the priorities for the maintaining the character of Downtown with redevelopment options of a different scale.** Provided that City Council has an interest in changing standards, Council needs to determine generally if is there an interest in expanding the exception process applicability, or to adjust the FAR or Height requirement directly without the need for an exception.

OPTION #1. MODIFY THE MINIMUM 1.0 FAR REQUIREMENT.

The current FAR requirement supports the LUPP policy to intensify development within Downtown. It does not directly address character issues of design, such as the minimum height requirement. **City Council could consider eliminating this standard in its entirety if the combination of other standards would yield the desired character of development focused along streets.** If the intent is for Main Street type of character, other standards can address this issue if there is clarity on the minimum height and design requirements. If Council wants to maintain a minimum FAR requirement to ensure that surface parking does not overtake a site, the FAR standard would have to be reduced to at least 0.5 FAR to allow for partial development of a site without forcing a two-story building type. If allowing for surface parking on standalone lots is not a concern, then eliminating the standard would be appropriate

One trade off of eliminating FAR is its effect on allowing for stand lone parking lots without a principal use. **Staff believes encouraging private surface parking lots is not supportive of Downtown character and if there is a change in FAR standards, a restriction on new standalone parking lots should be maintained.**

City Council may need to consider a LUPP amendment to the text of Chapter 2 depending on the degree of change or the precise geography of the proposed change due to the statement of requiring a 1.0 FAR for Downtown north of the railroad tracks. (Excerpt of LUPP text is attached) If the exception applies to all areas not along Main Street, then an LUPP amendment is needed. If the exception is more limited in scope along 6th Street an LUPP Amendment may not be warranted.

OPTION #2. MODIFY THE MINIMUM TWO-STORY REQUIREMENT:

The two-story height requirement is the most important urban design character standard of matching the historic look of Downtown. Traditionally, buildings had multiple stories due to the high value of the location or to give an opportunity for mixed use with residential above ground floor commercial. There are three basic approaches to changing this standard:

- a) Eliminate minimum height requirements.
- b) Change the two-story standard to only require part of a building to be two-stories. *This could include a requirement for the front façade to be two stories or a certain percentage of the ground floor to be covered by a second story.*
- c) Change to a minimum building height requirement to match Campustown of a height measured in feet. *This type of standard does not require any amount of usable floor area on a second floor, only that the building is a certain height. The height of a building is measured to its highest point by definition in the code, accounting for gable roofs and flat roofs with parapets.*

OPTION #3. MODIFY THE EXCEPTION CRITERIA FOR EITHER FAR OR HEIGHT:

This approach would make it a case-by-case review with site specific findings evaluated by the Zoning Board of Adjustment. The current criteria are difficult to meet and vague in their intent. New criteria could be established that address only additions to existing buildings or for all types of projects. **The criteria could be revised to clarify the intent of when such an exception is appropriate based upon the type of use, design, and the context within Downtown.** Staff would need to understand the Council's priorities for use, location, and character to help draft language for the change. Depending on the language of the exception, this could be a low bar to meet or a high bar to meet.

OPTION #4. INCLUDE MINIMUM FAR OR HEIGHT WITHIN URA CRITERIA:

If City Council still has a preference for more intense development, it could modify zoning standards to allow property owner flexibility, but incentivize more intense development with an amendment to the Urban Revitalizations Area criteria. Currently the design guidelines of the URA address design requirements, but do not address building intensity because of existing zoning standards. Lowering the zoning standards would reduce the cost of development and allow for easier redevelopment of sites for smaller projects.

Providing incentives would recognize the additional costs associated with high FAR development and appropriately provide incentives for a City preference of higher intensity development. Council should only accept this option if it is comfortable with one-story buildings being developed in Downtown as not all projects would seek URA incentives.

OPTION #5. REZONING OF PROPERTIES ALONG 6TH STREET TO NEIGHBORHOOD COMMERCIAL (NC):

With this option DSC zoning would remain as is, but would allow for properties with frontage along 6th Street to seek a rezoning from DSC to NC. This option would potentially affect five properties with uses that are not institutional. These properties are the Friedrich Iowa Realty offices, Ames Elks Lodge, multi-tenant building with Torrent and Triplett Companies, First National Bank, and Premier Credit Union. Both the First National Site and the Triplett Companies building also have frontage along 5th Street.

Neighborhood Commercial has a different approach than DSC. NC zoning is based upon limiting the maximum size of development while encouraging walkable smaller scaled development. NC zoning does not require minimum FAR or building height. NC does prohibit the location of parking between the building and street to support walkable environments. One very substantial difference is a requirement for on-site parking within NC zoning whereas DSC zoning does not require parking.

Under this option a property owner would need to balance the trade-offs of standards when determining how to redevelop a site with the limited scale and parking of NC zoning versus the more intense options available under DSC zoning. This option does not address other sites within Downtown that do not have frontage on 6th Street.

STAFF COMMENTS:

Requiring larger buildings can be viewed as a negative by a developer due to additional cost per square foot for construction, potentially triggering elevator and other accessibility requirements with larger buildings, and having floor area that may exceed an individual users interest and thereby potentially making it a multi-tenant building. The benefits of two-stories in Downtown are the efficient use of limited land resources, diversity of business types, and the contribution of character to the traditional downtown context of Main Street.

Balancing development standards that meet City goals with individual property owner objectives can be difficult in existing areas such as Downtown. The unique character of Downtown supports having standards that recognize it as a special location within the City and reinforce its character as new development occurs. This type of approach to development standards is consistent with the Goals and Objectives of the LUPP. Additionally, the high expectations for development support reinvestment and reuse of existing older buildings that make up the fabric of the Downtown.

The counter argument is that in order to facilitate reinvestment then some loosening of expectations is necessary and that most of the goals for Downtown character can be accomplished with reduced zoning standards.

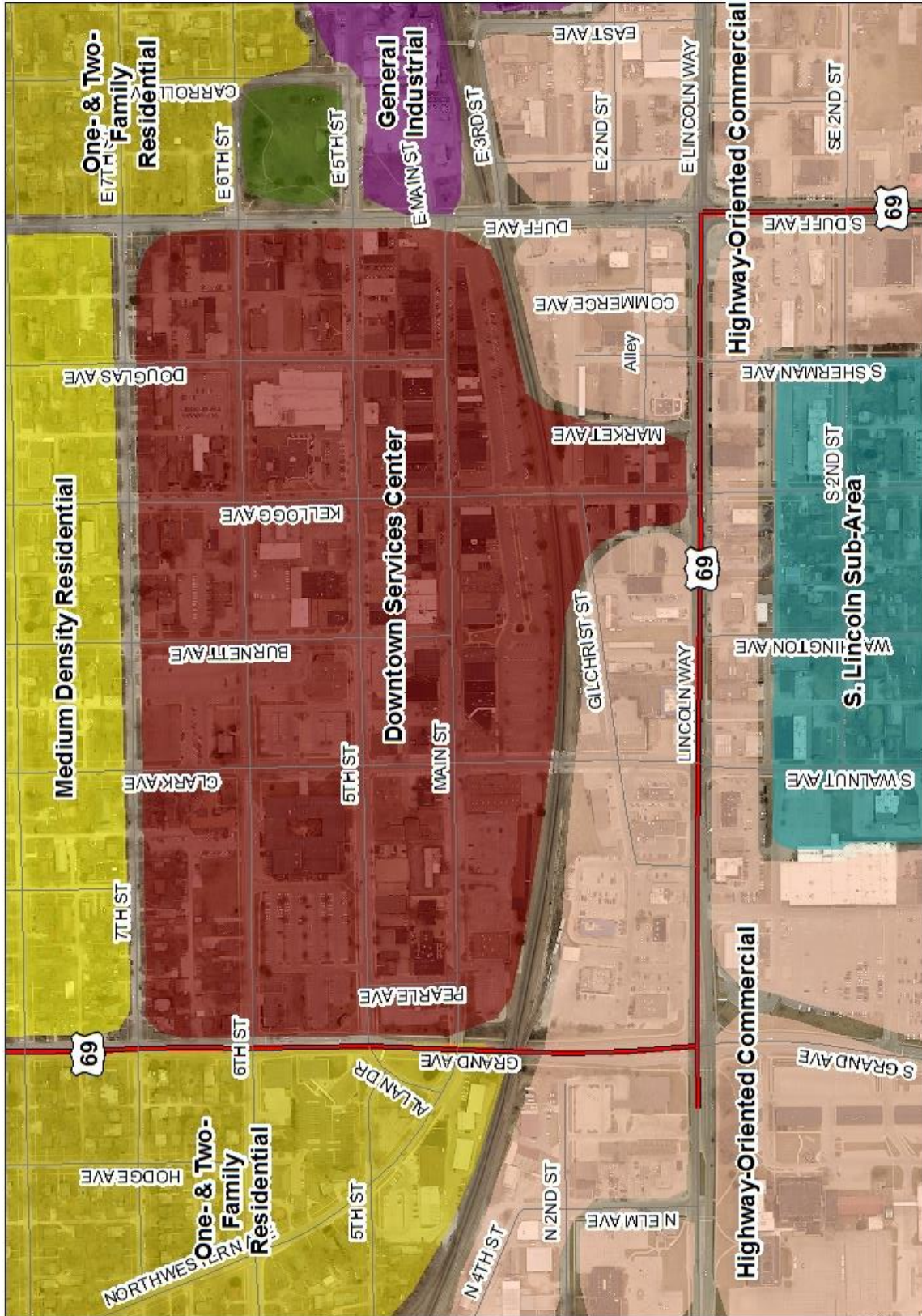
The five options described above are a reasonable range of choices based on the priorities for character of Downtown and an interest in encouraging redevelopment with lower intensity projects. **City Council must first determine if it's appropriate to reduce zoning standards for all projects or redefine the exception process to proceed with a zoning text amendment. Secondly, City Council must articulate a goal for the character of development in the Downtown Area to allow for staff to draft code changes that reflect the intent for the area.**

The FAR standard has less utility as a zoning standard for defining architectural character than minimum height standards. This is one reason why the new Downtown Gateway Commercial zoning does not include an FAR standard. However, FAR does assure that more floor area is developed and the intensity of use is increased overall for Downtown. The more floor area that is developed, the greater number of commercial businesses may locate Downtown and diversify the commercial base as desired by the City. **Staff believes that maintaining character is the priority for the periphery of Downtown and reducing or eliminating FAR would be feasible and still meet this goal.**

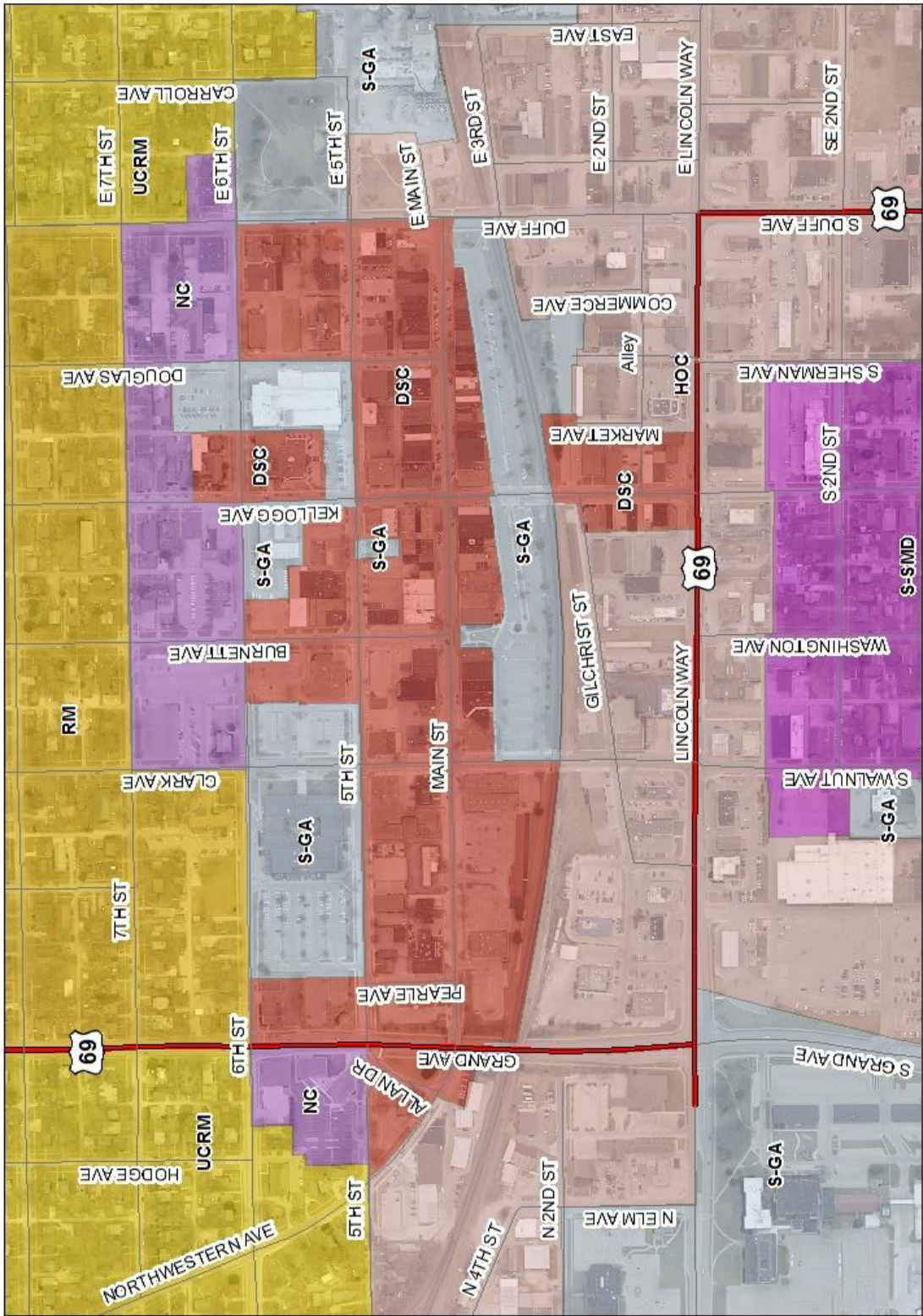
At the same time, reinforcing the two-story character seems appropriate to reach the City's objectives for Downtown. Although eliminating the standard would allow for building additions and changes that make single purpose redevelopment easier, it would likely detract from the current character if redevelopment replaces existing two-story buildings for a large number of sites. **Staff believes retaining a minimum building height standard for at least part of a building is a valuable standard for the City.**

The proposed amendments require prioritization by City Council along with similar project requests. **Depending on the direction of Council on the scope of changes or if Council has an interested in more refined options, the task of amending Downtown standards would be low to moderate in the number of hours (15-50 hours) of staff time directed to the project.** Staff does not envision substantial outreach as part of any changes to DSC zoning that affects the periphery of the Downtown.

Attachment 1: LUPP Downtown Land Use Designation



Attachment 2: Downtown Zoning



Attachment 3: Highlights Added

GOALS FOR A NEW VISION [LUPP excerpts p. 25]

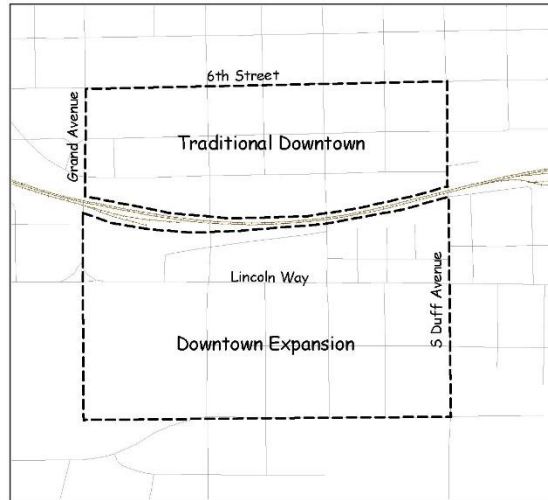
Goal No. 8. It is the goal of Ames to enhance the role of Downtown as a community focal point.

Objectives. In expanding and strengthening the role of Downtown as a community focal point, Ames seeks the following objectives.

- 8.A. Ames seeks to maintain and enhance a strong central activity center through the intensification, expansion and diversification of uses including visitor attraction, entertainment, high density residential, offices and business support services.
- 8.B. Ames seeks to improve and integrate the appearance of Downtown through thematic design, preservation of historically and architecturally significant structures and reuse of structures involving economically marginal activities.
- 8.C. Ames seeks to expand parking in Downtown and to integrate automobile access with additional modes of transportation.

Regional access should continue across Lincoln Way in providing direct access between Duff Avenue and the traditional Downtown. Additional direct access to Downtown should be established at the intersection of Duff Avenue and South 3rd Street.

The designation of South 3rd Street requires improvement in turning controls and connections with major streets.



Downtown Sub-Districts

Circulation. Inclusion of South 3rd Street with Downtown provides an opportunity to improve circulation involving the district. Its inclusion also improves north-south cross-town connections.

A realignment of South 3rd Street to connect with Grand Avenue is recommended. The realignment would involve cutting through the Lincoln Center (Target parking lot) adjacent to the Department of Transportation site. In connecting South 3rd Street with Grand Avenue, a more direct north-south route is created to the western boundary of Downtown. The route enables a free flow of traffic involving all sides of the district. The route also eliminates restrictions created by the presence of the railroad, which periodically interrupts traffic on Duff Avenue.

South 3rd Street
Realignment with



Parking. Parking is essential to improving the accessibility of Downtown and strengthening the district's viability. Parking improvements should consider the following locational and design criteria:

- Provide locations that are convenient to major activities;
- Cluster parking locations - leaving more income-generating building space; and,
- Discourage the negative impact that the void spaces created by surface parking have on pedestrian movement, shopping patterns and appearance.

Uses. Downtown's primary role has shifted from the traditional retail center to a major services center. Contributing to the current role are the large services employers including the Iowa Department of Transportation, City of Ames, financial institutions and others. Many of the remaining commercial uses have become smaller and more specialized. The largest concentrations of commercial uses involve historic Main Street, the emerging Depot area and the highway-oriented strip along Lincoln Way.

In becoming a 24-hour center, Downtown is envisioned as the most mixed use area of Ames. An additional mixture of uses as well as strengthening of some existing ones is recommended. Future uses should also be selectively grouped so as to share attraction and support. Future uses should emphasize the following:

- Small/Medium Business Center involving private lease/multiple professional/trade services, financial services, business support services, (e.g. copying, office supplies, computer services) and small conferencing;
- Dining and Entertainment Center involving sit-down eating and drinking services (but not additional fast-food services because of their competition with sit-down facilities and their orientation toward vehicular traffic rather than pedestrian), performance halls and amusements;
- Cultural Center involving arts, crafts, museum, learning center, library and activity center (e.g. senior citizen);
- Residences involving multi-family and second-floor/over commercial establishments;
- Public spaces involving parks, outdoor event/festival and farmers/crafts market; and,
- Specialty Retail Center, involving personal items, specialty foods, bookstore etc.

Intensity. Downtown is also envisioned as the most intensely developed area of Ames. The following intensities are recommended:

- Commercial – 1.0 or greater floor area ratio (ratio of total building floor area to total lot area) and 100 percent lot coverage in the sub-district/traditional Downtown located north of the railroad; 0.5 or greater floor area ratio and 50 percent lot coverage in the remainder of Downtown; and,
- Multi-Family Residential – High-density residential with the maximum allowable number of dwelling units and 50 percent lot coverage in the district.