

# Omaha, Nebraska, and Council Bluffs, Iowa

November 2–7, 2014



Urban Land  
Institute

# Omaha, Nebraska, and Council Bluffs, Iowa

Activating the Missouri Riverfront

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# About the Urban Land Institute

**THE MISSION OF THE URBAN LAND INSTITUTE** is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. ULI is committed to

- Bringing together leaders from across the fields of real estate and land use policy to exchange best practices and serve community needs;
- Fostering collaboration within and beyond ULI's membership through mentoring, dialogue, and problem solving;
- Exploring issues of urbanization, conservation, regeneration, land use, capital formation, and sustainable development;
- Advancing land use policies and design practices that respect the uniqueness of both the built and natural environments;
- Sharing knowledge through education, applied research, publishing, and electronic media; and

- Sustaining a diverse global network of local practice and advisory efforts that address current and future challenges.

Established in 1936, the Institute today has more than 34,000 members worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of the land use and development disciplines. Professionals represented include developers, builders, property owners, investors, architects, public officials, planners, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, academics, students, and librarians.

ULI relies heavily on the experience of its members. It is through member involvement and information resources that ULI has been able to set standards of excellence in development practice. The Institute has long been recognized as one of the world's most respected and widely quoted sources of objective information on urban planning, growth, and development.

Cover photo: Robert Lewis

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# About ULI Advisory Services

**THE GOAL OF THE ULI ADVISORY SERVICES** program is to bring the finest expertise in the real estate field to bear on complex land use planning and development projects, programs, and policies. Since 1947, this program has assembled well over 400 ULI-member teams to help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for issues such as downtown redevelopment, land management strategies, evaluation of development potential, growth management, community revitalization, brownfield redevelopment, military base reuse, provision of low-cost and affordable housing, and asset management strategies, among other matters. A wide variety of public, private, and nonprofit organizations have contracted for ULI's advisory services.

Each panel team is composed of highly qualified professionals who volunteer their time to ULI. They are chosen for their knowledge of the panel topic and screened to ensure their objectivity. ULI's interdisciplinary panel teams provide a holistic look at development problems. A respected ULI member who has previous panel experience chairs each panel.

The agenda for a five-day panel assignment is intensive. It includes an in-depth briefing day composed of a tour of the site and meetings with sponsor representatives; a day of hour-long interviews of typically 50 to 75 key community representatives; and two days of formulating recommendations. Long nights of discussion precede the panel's conclusions. On the final day on site, the panel makes an oral presentation of its findings and conclusions to the sponsor. A written report is prepared and published.

Because the sponsoring entities are responsible for significant preparation before the panel's visit, including sending extensive briefing materials to each member and arranging for the panel to meet with key local community members and stakeholders in the project under consideration, participants in ULI's five-day panel assignments are able to make accurate assessments of a sponsor's issues

and to provide recommendations in a compressed amount of time.

A major strength of the program is ULI's unique ability to draw on the knowledge and expertise of its members, including land developers and owners, public officials, academics, representatives of financial institutions, and others. In fulfillment of the mission of the Urban Land Institute, this Advisory Services panel report is intended to provide objective advice that will promote the responsible use of land to enhance the environment.

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As this event was a joint effort between two communities, many individuals and organizations were involved in the effort to educate and make information available to the panel. The panel acknowledges and thanks the more than 80 individuals who were interviewed and who

participated in various efforts with the panel. Representing both city and regional government agencies and a diverse and informed public, these stakeholders provided valuable information and perspectives through their passion and understanding of the issues, greatly aiding the panel in its analysis.

Last, through the generous support of the following sponsors, this panel would not have been possible: city of Omaha, city of Council Bluffs, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Omaha Convention and Visitors Bureau, BNSF Railway, ConAgra Foods Inc., Husch Blackwell LLP, Gallup Inc., Heistand Family Foundation, Allen & Company, Omaha's Metropolitan Entertainment and Convention Authority, the Sherwood Foundation, Back to the River, Council Bluffs Chamber of Commerce, and the Iowa West Foundation.

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# Foreword: The Panel's Assignment

**WHILE COUNCIL BLUFFS, IOWA**, has grown to the east and Omaha, Nebraska, to the west, it is the Missouri River that remains the seam that binds together the fabric of these two communities. In recent years, both cities have adjusted their development strategies toward the river with new projects that recognize the power and beauty of this ecological amenity. More important, the leadership in the two cities has committed to develop and activate the Missouri riverfront in a manner that can be truly transformational, thus becoming both the cause and the effect of sharing responsibility *for* and commitment *to* the success of the entire metropolitan area.

A redeveloped and active riverfront ought to be both a neighborhood amenity and a regional attraction. It should deliver a daily opportunity to experience a riverside that is friendly, safe, diverse, and, most important, dynamic. It must house a strategic mix of public and private uses. And it is obliged to serve as a connector of people and places, a destination for community celebration, a driver of economic development, and a source of pride for the entire region.

The goal for this initiative is to establish and to implement a vision that leverages the river and the riverfront as an engine for sustainable recreational, cultural, and economic development, thereby reclaiming the Missouri as a source of regional identity and establishing the Omaha–Council Bluffs region as a model river community for the 21st century.

## Study Area

The Missouri River, the longest river in the United States at 2,341 miles, begins near Brower's Spring, Montana, and traverses seven states to the north side of St Louis, where it connects with the Mississippi River. Between those two points, at mile marker 616, lie Council Bluffs, Iowa, and



*Location map.*

Omaha, Nebraska. As the familiar phrase states, a river really does run through it.

Ample plans have existed through the years (Back to the River Plan, circa 1973; Omaha Central Business District Plan, 1973; Omaha Downtown Master Plan, 2009; Bluffs Tomorrow: 2030 Plan, pending; Riverfront Master Plan; Playland Park Master Plan; and so forth), which have aimed at revitalizing the Omaha central business district (CBD) and riverfront in either jurisdiction. There have been site specific plans and projects such as Heartland



*Study area.*



of America Park, ConAgra Foods headquarters campus, Lewis and Clark Landing, National Park Service Midwest Regional Office, RiverFront Place Condos, Gallup University Campus, and Freedom Park along the riverfront in Omaha and Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park, Dodge Riverside Golf Club, Harrah's and Ameristar casinos, and the Western Historic Trails Center in Council Bluffs.

More recent development projects, such as the construction of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge in 2008, have symbolized a shift in perception of the river as a natural resource for recreation more than for industrial uses. The bridge links Omaha and Council Bluffs by foot and bicycle, directly connecting the two communities as well as improving options for the health of the residents of these two communities.

## The Panel's Assignment

The cities of Omaha and Council Bluffs asked the Urban Land Institute to help them cooperatively develop a vision for the Missouri riverfront by addressing the following tasks and questions while thinking about short-, medium-, and long-term practical applications:

- Develop a concept that encourages the activation of the riverfront through coordination and implementation efforts with a regional focus (between two distinct cities, counties, and states).
  - How should the jurisdictions work together to plan coordinated activities and to enhance the area's quality of life while also providing an economic boost for both sides of the river?
  - Are there enough public spaces present? What, if anything, can we do to encourage more use through events (movies or music) as well as outdoor recreation?
  - With the plans that have been created already, what additional development activities, if any, would you recommend?
  - How can private landowners and residents have a stake in building this cooperative future?
- Identify potential opportunities or barriers that promote or prevent activity from occurring along the riverfront.
  - What facilities or permanent attractions could be added to help activate the riverfront?
  - What is the best way to gauge success for events or activation on the riverfront? What metrics can be used?
  - Coordinate bike and pedestrian trails with easy access to visitors and locals. Improvements may facilitate more activity along the riverfront.
  - Discover potential opportunities to marry events, such as the College World Series or fireworks with concerts across the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge, Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park, or at the Century-Link Center Omaha.
  - Manage or mitigate environmental concerns. The solution might be levees, a flood plain, or a combined sewer overflow project.
  - Overcome limitations for vehicular access to the riverfront in some areas. For example, consider levees, the limited connectivity between privately owned properties, railroads, and so forth.
- Determine potential events, projects, or development opportunities that would overcome obstacles and improve opportunities for activities and accessibility along the riverfront.
  - How do we maximize attendance and ensure the financial success for coordinated events? Will economies of scale provide better service for and quality of the activities?
  - With the plans that have already been studied, are we as a region missing any potential development opportunities in the short, medium, or long term?
  - Should we consider additional investments to increase activities along the riverfront (thinking outside of the scope)?
  - Are additional public facilities or services needed to enhance the use of the riverfront?

# Market Overview for Prospective Growth

**ACTIVATING THE RIVERFRONT** means bringing and keeping people on the riverfront. It needs to be a place where people can live, work, recreate, and learn. In consideration of these premises, the ULI Advisory Services panel performed a brief scan of available market and population data to ask these questions: Can the riverfront actually get people there? And where might they come from?

Three primary sources of people are addressed in this market overview:

- those who can be attracted to live along the riverfront;
- those who can be attracted to be employed along the riverfront; and
- those who can be attracted to enjoy leisure time along the riverfront.

Great potential exists for attracting all three of these groups, although some of them will be the same people.

## Regional Context

With nearly 900,000 residents, the eight-county metro area (five in Nebraska, three in Iowa) ranks as the 60th largest of 381 officially defined metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) in the United States. Largest is New York City with about 20 million residents, but closer to the Omaha–Council Bluffs region are Minneapolis, ranking 16th; St. Louis at 19th; Denver at 21st; and the Kansas City metro area that spans Missouri and Kansas at 30th.

Moreover, Omaha–Council Bluffs ranks 47th among the country's MSAs in per capita income and 37th in per capita gross metropolitan product (GMP). With such rankings higher than population, Omaha has more than double

its fair share of Fortune 500 companies headquartered in the area. Omaha has five such companies when a rough per capita share should be a little more than two. Thus, the Greater Omaha area can boast higher productivity and quality-of-life metrics than its fair share might otherwise suggest. In short, the Omaha–Council Bluffs region is a big-league economic player, and its growth rate projections exceed many larger metro areas.

## The Riverfront's Destination and Regional Draw Potential

Focusing on the riverfront and its potential market attraction, the panel looked for evidence that the Omaha–Council Bluffs region contained the natural amenities or location traits that are attractive to a high-skilled demographic segment that is typically found in denser communities (e.g., urban dwellers). Understanding households' wants in this region will help build more targeted and effective marketing strategies as well as urban planning priorities. Used here are the Tapestry™ segments produced by the private socioeconomic data vendor Esri for 2013. Tapestry consists of 65 demographic segments across the nation, 11 of which have the strongest characteristics and interest for living in central city locations (see table, following page).

While the core of the riverfront can be considered part of downtown Omaha, because downtown Council Bluffs is much farther from the river, the Council Bluffs riverfront also exhibits many similarities for people attracted to center cities. Key among those is the proximity to downtown Omaha, although an attempt to attract the same kind of people to the increasingly charming downtown Council Bluffs should not be ignored in the long run.

## 11 Tapestry Groups Associated with Central City and Urban Core Living

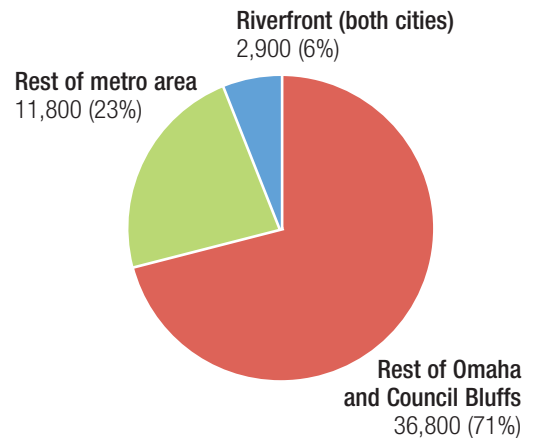
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Laptops and Lattes</li> <li>■ Urban Chic</li> <li>■ Metropolitans</li> <li>■ Trend Setters</li> <li>■ Metro Renters</li> </ul>	<p>This clustering of groups is informally called <i>Urban Professionals</i>. The people tend to be already living in urban centers, but such centers need not be just large cities. Instead, the centers can also be urban places in larger, well-established suburbs and even smaller metro areas. The households tend to be the early arrivals in freshly revitalizing urban centers.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Connoisseurs</li> <li>■ In Style</li> <li>■ Prosperous Empty Nesters</li> <li>■ Young and Restless</li> </ul>	<p>This clustering of groups is informally called <i>Displaced Urbanites</i>. The people tend to prefer living in urban centers, but cannot or have not yet found appropriate housing “products” to satisfy their needs. Typically, such products are far more maintenance free and, in some cases, have higher values and larger units. These people are less likely to be the first to repopulate an urban center.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ College Towns</li> <li>■ Dorms-to-Diplomas</li> </ul>	<p>This clustering is known informally as <i>College Students</i>. They insist on being close to a lot of social activity but cannot afford high housing expenses, although some rely on their parents’ money for higher-amenity apartments and townhomes.</p>

Although the Tapestry groupings are different from one another, they have some generally shared qualities that distinguish them as urban center populations:

- few or no children;
- single, newly married, or older empty nesters;
- well educated, information-tech savvy;
- relatively high per capita income (or college students);
- high transit use and low automobile use;
- physically active, even if just dog walkers;
- a propensity toward multifamily and higher-density housing;
- a propensity toward older city housing or newer housing in larger downtowns or older suburban centers; and
- active in community and volunteering.

Presently in the Omaha–Council Bluffs metro area, about 114,000 people fall into one of the above urban prospects

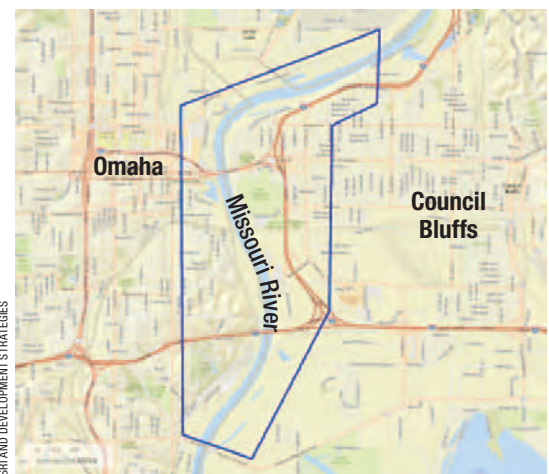
## Urban Prospect Households in Metro Omaha, 2013



Source: Bob Lewis, *Development Strategies*.

demographic groups. The groups translate to 51,500 households, or a little more than 2.2 people per household. They are collectively termed *urban prospects* for this analysis because they are prospective residents—and even workers—for the urban riverfront.

An estimated 2,900 such households are already living in the roughly defined study area straddling the riverfront in Council Bluffs and Omaha (see chart and map). Those households make up about 6 percent of all urban prospect



Roughly defined demographic polygon for Missouri Riverfront in Council Bluffs and Omaha.

households in the metropolitan area and comprise 46 percent of all households in the area shown on the map regardless of demographic group. That is, just over half of the people now residing along the urban riverfront are *not* urban prospects; most of them live on the Council Bluffs side of the river, which tends to be less urban and more suburban in character.

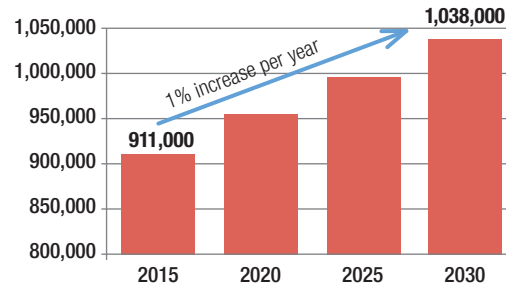
Another 36,800 urban prospect households are found elsewhere in the two cities, or 71 percent of all such households in the metro area. Many of those households are in housing in or close to downtown Omaha, but outside the study area. Some urban prospect members also live in or near downtown Council Bluffs. Most, however, live throughout the two cities but have not found or relocated to housing that suits their preferences closer to the urban core.

Finally, 11,800 urban prospect households are found elsewhere in the eight-county metro area—some are in Douglas or Pottawattamie counties outside the two cities, the rest are scattered throughout the other six counties. Those households make up almost one-quarter (23 percent) of all urban prospect households in the metro area and about 8 percent of all households outside of the cities of Council Bluffs and Omaha.

In short, about 48,600 urban prospect households are in the metro area now, which have characteristics and preferences for urban center housing that are not already living in the general riverfront environs. By creating such housing in the riverfront area, limited by environmental and legal restrictions, developers should have little trouble finding sufficient potential renters and buyers.

And more people are coming. Independent population projections obtained from the University of Nebraska (for the Nebraska counties) and from Woods & Poole Economics Inc. (for the Iowa counties) indicate an almost 1 percent growth rate per year in metropolitan population between 2015 and 2030 (see graph). This growth rate would add some 127,000 more residents by 2030, or about 50,000 net new households. On the basis of today's proportions,

## Population Projections for Omaha–Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area



Sources: University of Nebraska, Woods & Poole.

7,500 of those new households will match the characteristics of urban prospects.

Riverfront activation can also be a function of more employment in the boundary. Considerable employment already exists in the study area on both sides of the river, with the obvious examples of ConAgra Foods, Gallup, and the casinos. Those companies demonstrate that office and entertainment or recreation jobs and employees can be readily attracted to riverfront locations.

The U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis estimated that the Omaha metro area had 586,600 jobs in 2013—the latest year available for *all* jobs, including proprietors and other jobs not normally recorded as nonfarm wage and salary workers (as of this panel). Those jobs also include multiple jobholders, not simply employed persons. They represent about 655 jobs for every 1,000 residents in the metro area.

This ratio is high in the national economy; in this case, the high ratio appears to be driven primarily by a great many nonmetro residents who commute to the metro counties each day for work. Thus, their numbers are not counted in the metro population, but they are counted in metro employment. The high ratio also speaks to the relative strength of the Greater Omaha economy to generate jobs that require a substantial number of outside workers.

Recall the impressive earlier ranking of 37th for Omaha in GMP despite ranking 60th in population.

Two sources of employment projections were obtained:

- The first is made on the basis of population projections, described earlier, and the ratio of jobs per population. On this basis, another 100,000 jobs could be located in the Omaha–Council Bluffs metro area by 2030.
- The second is made on the basis of independent projections by the University of Nebraska—Lincoln (UNL). Although the projections were conducted before the recent Great Recession, the UNL projections, adjusted

for actual jobs in 2012, suggest that the metro area could attract another 150,000 jobs by 2030.

Thus, between 100,000 and 150,000 *net new jobs* and their jobholders could be in the metro area by 2030. Those workers will need places to work, and, increasingly, the jobs will be in services-oriented economic sectors requiring higher levels of education (think *creative class*) and will be held by a great many people fitting the urban prospects descriptions.



# Riverfront Development Principles

**THE AREA THE PANEL FOCUSED ON** is large: covering 4,000 acres and 20 miles of riverfront. Clearly, redevelopment and activation of this entire area will need to be phased over an extended period of time. Thus, it is essential to establish and commit to certain core values that can guide the process throughout.

On the basis of the information provided in the panel's briefing book and gathered through the dozens of interviews conducted while on site as well as through the extensive experience of the ULI panelists, the panel used seven principles to guide conversations and to inform the recommendations.

## One Riverfront

Two states, two counties, two cities, multiple neighborhoods, public and private space, dozens of varied uses, highly diverse natural and built environments, and many jurisdictions and constituents: these elements make up great challenges to be faced here. Yet they also make for great opportunities—the opportunities that could make this project and this community a model for others across the country.

The panel concluded that this initiative would work best if it were planned, managed, marketed, and potentially developed as a single entity. Both Council Bluffs and Omaha will have their own focus and priorities, and those must be fully reflected in the creation and implementation of the development plan. But, whatever happens in this riverfront area affects everything else in and around the area—on both sides of the river. Constant vigilance and sensitivity must be paid to how all of the pieces work together. A sustained, singular vision will help ensure protection of the environment, the right mix of uses, the right design, the right access, and the most efficient and effective operation



from programming special events to maintaining public spaces.

*Satellite image of study area.*

## Connectivity

A concerted effort must be made to improve connectivity within and to the riverfront. To develop the entire riverfront most effectively while also supporting the success of the individual attractions and amenities within the district,



*The Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge is the best pedestrian means to cross the river between Omaha and Council Bluffs.*

the two cities must fully complete the existing hike and bike trails that surround much of the area. Nothing could be more basic and more essential. Also important will be adding another pedestrian means to cross the river somewhere within the eight miles between the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge on the north and the Iowa 92/U.S. 275 bridge on the south.

A better connection between the riverfront and the adjacent neighborhoods and nearby communities is needed: through gateway entrances to the riverfront that are highly visible, well signed, and accessible as well as through a riverfront trail that is connected to existing or planned hike and bike trails on both sides of the river.

## Density

Although an enormous amount of attractive green space and natural environment runs along the riverfront area, areas for more concentrated commercial development need to be established to complement enhanced attractions and recreational activities. This new development could occur in various locations along the riverfront but primarily around the gateway entrances beginning with both sides of the north riverfront that is anchored by the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge. Such a residential and commercial development would bring people and activity to the riverfront daily and not be driven only by special events and programming. People would attract more people and also would create a safer and more welcoming environment.

## Mixed Uses

The new development should include more residential and office developments as well as targeted restaurants and service uses. The broader mix of uses will provide a great variety of activity and spread the use of the riverfront district over a longer day—maybe not 24/7 but perhaps 18/7.

## Experience the River

Currently, this river does not have a high recreational use; yet a redeveloped riverfront should recalibrate the community's embrace of the beauty, history, and recreational romance of the river. Throughout the district, river views, accessibility, and engagement need to be protected and improved. Previous plans were well intentioned and thought out, but perhaps the 2010 flood left many feeling wary about those plans. The panel recommends revisiting those earlier documents and incorporating their strategies where specifically relevant or complementary to a newly devised approach.

## Design and Scale

High-quality, innovative design is essential to integrate new housing and business development as well as recreational, environmental, and cultural uses into a beautiful natural environment. The high visibility of this project also provides a platform for design that sets a new standard in the region, reflects the long-term vision and aspirations of the community, and can help attract additional new development at varying scales to the area.

# Links to Opportunities

**THE WEALTH OF BACKGROUND** information, built and planned projects, and planning studies as well as the panel's site tours and interviews with stakeholders confirmed that the Omaha–Council Bluffs region is vibrant and growing. It has a strong urban center and attractive suburban and rural areas and is close to outdoor activity and natural resources. Although the river is not the geographic center of the metropolitan area, it is a seam that has great opportunity to bind the two cities, counties, and states.

## Varied Spaces and Scales

The existing fabric near and along the riverfront has a variety of spaces: walkable urban districts, open areas meant to serve large events, industrial areas, suburban development, and large open areas that are natural or undeveloped. Many strong assets are in place, including a major airport close to downtown and a well-developed highway network with ongoing improvements. Although downtown streets are well developed and maintained, some are oversized with limited streetscape features such as trees, bike racks, and angled parking. This limitation is less conducive to a vibrant urban core, which would provide the strong connections needed for a vibrant riverfront. Downtown Omaha also has large areas dedicated to parking, with more than 40,000 spaces. This parking is often at the sacrifice of the planning principles critical to leveraging the river as an engine for sustainable recreational, cultural, and economic development.

## Plethora of Attractions and Assets

Omaha and Council Bluffs have many attractions and assets near and along the riverfront as well as many planned projects and potential opportunities. On the Omaha side of the river are Miller's Landing, the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian

Bridge, Lewis and Clark Landing, Heartland of America Park, Lauritzen Gardens, and the Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium. Council Bluffs has many natural areas and a well-connected trail system on the levee, the newly restored chute, Narrows River Park, golf courses, hotels and casinos, the Western Historic Trails Center, a recreation complex, and Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park.

Many exciting opportunities are underway or still under plan: Freedom Park, trail links from Carter Lake to the existing riverside trail network, development at the site of the former Omaha Public Power District power plant, multimodal transportation such as bus rapid transit and streetcar lines, and the next phases for the Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park and mixed-use development at Playland Park.

With these individual pieces in place and several exciting plans in the works, Omaha and Council Bluffs have the perfect opportunity to stop and consider the overall vision for the region and how to best connect these pieces.

## Challenges

Bear in mind the constraints are not insurmountable and, instead, can inform and strengthen the recommended core planning principles. These challenges can direct the priorities and the next steps.

Currently, the connections to the riverfront are weak and limited. Access points to the riverfront are not clearly marked: for example, how do people get from Omaha's Old Market entertainment district to the riverfront? Connections to the river can be strengthened by clearly identifying obvious entry points and clarifying the wayfinding system. Signature projects, such as the convention center, turn their backs on the river while also forming a barrier to river access.





Missouri River riverfront attractions.

Why go to the riverfront? This question was raised many times during our workshop, both by panelists and local stakeholders. The attractions and draws to the river are varied, but do not sustain long visits or everyday use and activity. For example, very few restaurants and food services are on or near the riverfront that would attract daily users, families, or nearby workers. In addition, existing venues and attractions outside the study area and central core of downtown compete for attention, such as Askarben Village and Midtown Crossing. Strengthening the attractions, activities, and access to the riverfront could help overcome these obstacles.

The river is a powerful force, moving with fast velocity and occasionally with debris. Floodwalls and levees necessarily protect Omaha and Council Bluffs, while also preventing access and views at points. Few access points for boats are available, but include Miller's Landing and the marina at Lewis and Clark Landing, natural settings in Council Bluffs, and points farther upriver. Further enhancing the trails, the connections between trails, and the areas to view the river are good tactics for taking advantage of the river's beauty while also respecting its power.

Other environmental concerns exist along the river, such as the contaminated site at the former ASARCO plant and flooding, which has caused groundwater upwelling when flooding occurs for a sustained time. These issues present some limitations, but they have been well managed and have resulted in solutions that allow for continued activity and enjoyment of the riverfront.

The current project to construct the combined sewer overflows system presents opportunities, such as a longer-term plan for trail or park improvements that is coincident with right-of-way acquisitions. Omaha is already considering the opportunities for stormwater management using green infrastructure, which could work very well with future development along the riverfront. Levee strengthening on the Council Bluffs side presents opportunities to improve trails and viewing points along the river.

A final challenge to consider in activating the riverfront is the distance between attractions and assets. The distances are large, with the entire study area covering 11 miles along the river. Recommendations and strategies for addressing this challenge follow.

# Panel Recommendations

**THE OMAHA–COUNCIL BLUFFS AREA** is full of activity, and the ULI panel was impressed by the amount of development and infrastructure investment occurring along the Missouri in this region. Although the panel had been asked to present new ideas for partnership between communities on both sides of the river, the panel members' impression was that much hard work had already been done. The study area has many event spaces and development in the vicinity that provide community members a destination. And, the sheer scale of the land along the riverfront can accommodate much more development.

However, the panel has taken the position that stronger connections must be made between the many destinations on the river and that both communities need to organize to develop concurrently. Until then, development in this area will continue to generate single-use, stand-alone projects. Ultimately, the area will succeed if it is a place full of amenities for the residents and workers as much as for the visitors who come for festivals, conventions, and sporting events.

The ULI panel proposes a vision for the future development of the Omaha–Council Bluffs riverfront with the major goal of facilitating activation strategies that make linear connections to surrounding neighborhoods and set the tone for future density development.

The panel recommends focusing first on the area around the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge, thus building on the strong existing infrastructure and the connection the bridge provides from Lewis and Clark Landing to the Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park. This core area can be further enhanced and strengthened, thereby serving as the activation center for further success. Recommendations have been made for the core area as defined above, with more specific proposals for tactical investments.



## Activation Strategy: Harmonize Event Schedules and Operations on Both Sides of the River

*The panel recommends development efforts and programs be focused in the footprint areas of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge.*

The notion that programmed events are important tools in activating and animating riverfronts is widely accepted on the basis of decades of successful, crowd-pleasing productions along riverbanks in cities around the world. Although activation and animation are important, a related and even more valuable community benefit is this: special events give people a reason to come to a river.

A plethora of riverfront events occur annually in Omaha and Council Bluffs. Public and private events of all sizes—from as few as a dozen people to as many as a hundred thousand or more—fill Omaha's riverfront annual event calendar. And thanks to venues in Council Bluffs such as Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park, Harrah's Stir Concert Cove, Harrah's Council Bluff hotel and casino, and Ameristar Casino Hotel, patrons on the Iowa side of the river are treated regularly to wonderful and diverse entertainment not far from the banks of one of the nation's great rivers.

However, painting this very positive picture of riverside entertainment on both banks of the Missouri does not mean that all is well. The local entertainment marketplace is changing, a change that seriously challenges the sustainability, let alone the growth, of crowd-pleasing events along and near both sides of the river. The leadership in Omaha and Council Bluffs needs to immediately recognize the problems described in the following paragraphs and take action to turn this situation around for the future.

Here are some of the reported problems that are now causing, or may cause, special events—some longstanding—to leave their riverside or near-river homes. On the Omaha side, the following has been reported:

- Some major events are simply outgrowing the available riverfront and near-the-river venues.
- The cost of renting public parks and parking and the rising costs of producing the events themselves (e.g., staging, utilities, etc.) are becoming prohibitive.
- At least two of the main near-river event venues—Heartland of America Park and Lewis and Clark Landing—do not have adequate electrical capacity or a potable water supply large enough to support large events.
- Some smaller events can't operate in the shadow of some larger events.
- Other venues provide, from a size, cost, parking, and production standpoint, a very attractive alternative to the riverfront special-events venues.
- Natural and other barriers limit direct connections to the river, from parts of downtown and from some of the riverside venues themselves.

On the Council Bluffs side, the reported problems are as follows:

- Because Council Bluffs depends in part on customers from the much larger Omaha community, a lack of coordination for its special-event calendar can cause schedule conflicts. Those scheduling conflicts result in

decreased attendance at Iowa-side concerts, festivals, and other special events.

- Without regular coordination of venue development, Council Bluffs and Omaha are in danger of duplication and unnecessary competition.
- The casino industry has given a significant boost to Council Bluffs's near-river entertainment and special-events capability. That will remain, but only as long as the casino business itself stays strong.
- By the mere fact of its geography, the center of the city of Council Bluffs is not near the river.

To temper, if not fully remedy, the obstacles now facing special-events production on both banks of the river and to bring more people to the river, the panel strongly offers some suggestions. On the Omaha side, the city needs to do the following:

- The city should seriously consider reducing or doing away with rental fees for its special-events venues, consider making capital infrastructure improvements (e.g., adequate electrical and water supplies), and consider making parking free or nominal during special events.
- The city should evaluate all city-owned properties used for entertainment and events to ensure that each is in its highest and best use.
- Ongoing discussions should take place among public- and private-event producers and organizations to ensure that all events are being leveraged to the maximum economic benefit of the total community.
- Serious efforts should be undertaken to solve a host of connectivity problems—physical barriers between downtown and the river and between some riverfront parks and venues and the river, gaps in trails along the river, and transportation access along the riverside.

Council Bluffs needs to do as follows:

- The city should continue to develop sports, entertainment, and event venues that will survive regardless of the ups and downs of the casino industry.





*Memphis in May International Festival.*

- The city should create new connections to the river's natural, undisturbed riverfront floodways (e.g., walking tours, bird-watching tours).

And, for the further benefit of the Omaha riverfront—and the Council Bluffs riverfront—as major attractors of locals and visitors to the Missouri River, the panel recommends

- that both cities agree to a coordinated scheduling of events to maximize attendance on both sides of the river;
- that both cities agree to a coordinated approach to venue development aimed at preventing costly duplications; and
- that the two cities consider jointly creating a major new festival, a festival of the magnitude of the Memphis in May International Festival in Tennessee; the Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina; South by Southwest (SXSW) in Austin, Texas; and so forth. Perhaps a festival rooted in the history of the region would be well received. But, in any case, the cities should mount a unique, big, and bold festival with the capability to brand the two cities and stage it along the river that binds them.

## Activation Strategy: Expand and Encourage Common Experiences on Both Sides of the River

The people of Omaha and Council Bluffs have always come to their riverfront for commerce and seasonal recreation. Now it's time to activate the Missouri riverfront with



*Omaha Riverfront Park.*

everyday happenings. It will serve as a gathering place for locals and a destination for regional travelers. With a few planned and programmed interventions, the perception of the riverfront will improve and attract people to the site.

### Add Human-Scale Development

Inspired by and located around the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge, manageable, small-scale development would flourish on both sides of the river's edge. Examples include the following:

- a mixture of seating options such as benches, tables with chairs, ledges;
- a variety of food vendors and food trucks;
- public restrooms;
- a playground;
- a dog park;
- a fitness course;
- a beach volleyball court; and
- a floating dock (removed for icy conditions).

With the development in place, opportunities to connect the new facility to the walk and bike trails with other riverfront facilities will emerge, which will help attract visitors.

### Enhance and Improve Wayfinding

In coordination with human-scale elements, build in a process of discovery for Omaha–Council Bluffs riverfront. The first step is a professional wayfinding system such



JAN MINAMI

Fulton Mall bench in Fresno, California.



JAMES A. CLOAR

Food truck gathering in Tampa, Florida.



KENDRA RIGGS



Adventure Playground, part of Wheaton Regional Park, Maryland.



METHOD CONSTRUCTION

An example of an active boat dock, grocery store, and restaurant is Westward and Little Gull Grocery on Lake Union in Seattle, Washington.



DIANE SILVER

Beneful Dream Dog Park in Veterans Park in Alabaster, Alabama.

as the one developed in Mercer County, New Jersey, that includes interpretive signs as well as directional signs for pedestrians and drivers.

Here are examples of three levels of wayfinding to consider:

- people level: interpretive signs and directional signs that move people along trails and between activity nodes.
- surface street level: signs that identify riverfront parking and directional signs that locate particular riverfront amenities.

- freeway level: signs that add the riverfront for easy exiting.

Please note that the best wayfinding systems pay careful attention to sign placement.

### Create Opportunities for Entertainment

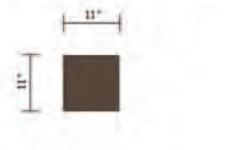
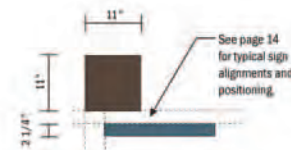
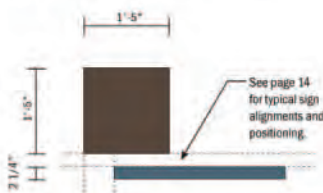
Programming the public space serves as the ever-changing draw to an area such as the riverfront. Laying the groundwork for programming includes confirming that public spaces easily accommodate electrical power needs and offer sufficiently flat surfaces. Assuring an ongoing maintenance program for parks and trails is crucial.



## Family of Signs

The newly named Abbott Marshlands facility has undertaken a wayfinding and signage program to extend the branding resolution into the environment. The overall goal is to create a cohesive sense of place to a widely diverse experience, from archeology to bird watching, from kayaking to hiking.

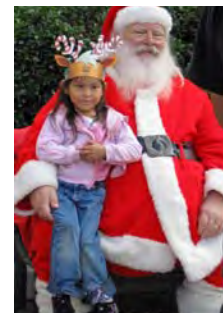
Overall, our mission is to provide a program that will enhance the visitors' experience and awareness of the extent and diversity of Abbott Marshlands in its entirety.



Russell Design wayfinding signage.

Prime examples of well-programmed spaces include the Porch at 30th Street Station in Philadelphia and Bryant Park in New York City, but parks around the country offer ideas. Here are a few:

- a small-scale performance schedule;
- a busking ordinance encouraging solo performers;
- pop-up miniature golf during one month each year;
- seasonal activities;
- a riverboat cruise;
- outdoor competitions such as chess, horseshoes, volleyball;



From left: Visalia, California, street music; face painting in Fresno, California; Christmas with Santa in Fresno, California.

- a kiosk featuring products from Old Market shops; and
- fitness classes.

The concept for public-space programming is simple: whenever people visit, there is something to do.

### Develop Destinations of Natural and Geographic Education and Engagement

The riverfront's future success depends on drawing residents to the site and activating it. Strategically locating cultural and educational attractions in the site not only will attract people to the riverfront, but it will begin to build commercial activity in an area that can be leveraged for future density and economic developments.

**A Welcoming Center.** A river center, perhaps named the Missouri River Commons River Center, would match the attraction of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge from an entirely different perspective. Such a center would gather stakeholders and would serve as a regional or even national education center about river life. The proposed location is in, or adjacent to, the existing National Park Service (NPS) building. Additional stories could be added for the NPS offices. The idea is to gather community part-



*The Parking Garden at the Lauritzen Gardens is an example of how green spaces can be designed to highlight the natural habitat along the Missouri River.*

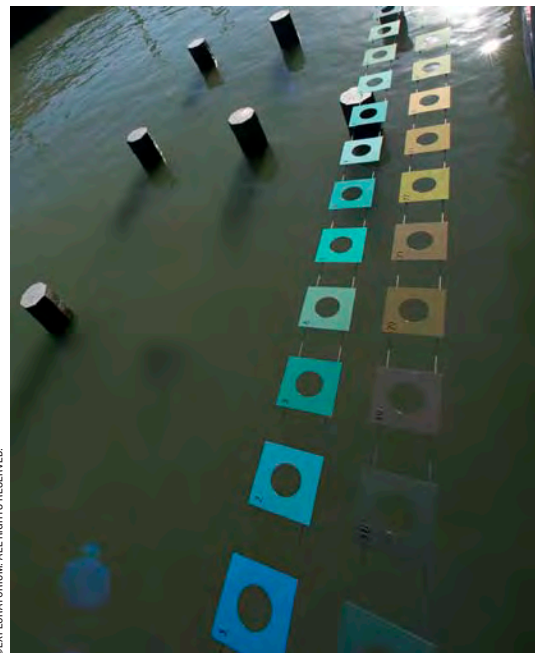
LAURITZEN GARDENS

ners to support the various facets of the river center with a coordinating entity that would manage the center, oversee small-scale development, and operate programming along the riverfront.

**Environment and Science.** The new Exploratorium on the bay in San Francisco is a perfect example of interactive public museum of science and art. A boardwalk surrounds the building and offers interactive exhibits about water flow, silt buildup, water content, evaporation, and wind measurement. As an example, the Color of Water display (pictured at below left) helps visitors understand that ever-changing bay dynamics affect the bay's color day to day, sometimes even moment to moment.

Partners in Omaha and Council Bluffs might include the Omaha Children's Museum and the Nebraska Wildlife Rehab Inc. An outdoor science classroom, such as the one Nebraska Wildlife Rehab developed with Underwood Hills Focus School on the school's property, may be ideal for this location. Schools of all levels might want to be involved.

**Natural History.** The natural river environment can be explored with cooperation from museums and universities. The Lauritzen Gardens might build a greenhouse wall or kiosk with a living natural habitat. The Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium might provide a small aquarium with fish native to the river, such as carp and catfish.



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*The interactive boardwalk around the new Exploratorium in San Francisco, California, provides a fun experience on the waterfront.*



UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD MUSEUM, COUNCIL BLUFFS, IOWA

*The Union Pacific Railroad Museum is a cultural attraction that can be a strong partner, highlighting the history of settlement along the Missouri River.*

Educational resources abound. The Creighton Green Jays organization encourages students to become involved in environmental issues and sustainability with the Creighton University and Greater Omaha area communities.

The University of Nebraska Omaha offers an undergraduate degree in environmental science and master's programs in biology, including ecology. Research can be conducted right on the riverfront.

The panel heard about Omaha Parks and Recreation's "Take A Hike" program, a self-directed hike using QR codes that combines kids, technology, and nature. This program could prove to be an enduring riverfront attraction for families.

**Regional History.** The riverfront region has a rich history. A natural partner to showcase the glories of yesteryear would be the Durham Museum, housed in Omaha's former Union Station.

Railroads have been essential to the region for years and are inextricably tied to the river. Partnering with the Union Pacific Railroad Museum in Council Bluffs could bring railroad history to life on the riverfront.

**Arts and Culture.** Partnerships with galleries could include a rotating exhibition of river-related art works. Permanent murals can be included in the development plans.

Sculptures are plentiful in Council Bluffs and Omaha, but consider river-related sculptures that can be climbed such as those at Griffis Sculpture Park in Cattaraugus County, New York. What about developing a public art trail? An easy project to begin with would be creating a digital information system or a printed brochure for an art trail.

A small performance stage could be the new home to jugglers, musicians, and dancers, whether impromptu or programmed.

### Measuring Success

Be sure to track investment made on the riverfront, both for public and private development. If possible, begin with



CATTARAUGUS COUNTY EDPT



Griffis Sculpture Park,  
Cattaraugus County, New York.



a history of projects, such as the trail systems and the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge. A history or timeline of riverfront projects provides the structure for tracking investment as it happens.

Count pedestrians in several locations as an important baseline survey. Then follow up with repeat surveys each year to track increased use. Adding trail counters along the existing trail systems, as well as on the Bob Kerrey

*These images represent the scale of competition and opportunity for the Omaha–Council Bluffs riverfront attractions.*



*B-cycle station.*

Pedestrian Bridge entrances, is another useful pedestrian metric. Existing data collection, such as that available from the Heartland B-cycle bike station at the Omaha base of the bridge, can also be monitored.

Finally, consider a consumer satisfaction survey on site and online for events and for the riverfront experience.

Riverlife, a nonprofit organization that has been successfully advocating for a three-river confluence in Pittsburgh over the past 15 years, says: "Successful riverfront development doesn't have to start on a grand scale. Sometimes the smallest projects are the most potent."

## Activation Strategy: Organize the Physical Realm

Ultimately, the challenge for planners and designers is to give form to the many good findings, principles, and best practices that have already been presented.

One of the biggest challenges is the sheer scale of the Omaha–Council Bluffs urban region and the many competing attractions that are convenient to residents living miles away from the Missouri River. The Missouri riverfront needs to be a compelling and unique destination for residents who have plenty of other choices, such as Midtown Center, Aksarben Village, and even the Pinnacle Bank Arena and the West Haymarket district in Lincoln, Nebraska, a short drive from Omaha's western edge. (Driving time estimates varied.)

The study area along the Missouri River offers many compelling destinations, but many of them are distant and separated from the river and each other. Planners are confronted by 11 miles of river and 22 miles of shoreline with varying opportunities and challenges. For example, walkers and bikers need to go at least ten miles starting at Lewis and Clark Landing to simply loop over the Veteran's Memorial Highway and back to the Landing. This distance is simply not an option for many families, nor is it even possible today with the gaps in the riverfront trail system. Yet active cyclists who use portions of this trail system have invented many ways to reach a variety of destinations.

To travel from the zoo to Lewis and Clark Landing and back is at least a six-mile roundtrip. The zoo is not accessible from the river, and walkers, bikers, and those in cars cannot loop northward because river crossings do not exist north of downtown or access is restricted at the Eppley Airfield. Of course, six miles may be an appealing distance for active individuals or families, for those who use the B-cycle system, or for those who have time.

Lauritzen Gardens is two miles from the Lewis and Clark Landing; if access were available, people could easily walk or bike that route and then reach Freedom Park should it be reopened to the public. This distance is comfortable for vigorous walkers, casual cyclists, or noontime runners, yet again no loops are found at this distance. Several destinations are within one mile of Lewis and Clark Landing, such as Heartland of America Park, Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park, and Miller's Landing. This proximity allows for cooperative programming of events that could extend between venues.

The large scale of the Missouri riverfront argues that a larger number of attractions should be in closer proximity to allow families and those with less time or athletic ability to enjoy a range of activities on the river. Even a simple walk over the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge from Lewis and Clark Landing and back is nearly two miles.

### Site Context and Access

A tour north along the Missouri shows how the various shorelines upstream and downstream can be transformed to support a more active and dynamic riverfront.

The panel strongly supports developing the remainder of the Gallup University Campus site to add activity to the riverfront trail and Miller's Landing as an active attraction on the river. A business partner could join with Gallup to add office space here that could be leased until Gallup is ready to expand. Additional office workers in this area could support riverfront retail in the future.

The panel supports redeveloping Freedom Park as parkland with active and passive uses such as camping, nature trails, or a low-intensity golf course that could sustain floods without expensive repairs. Likewise on the east side of the river, the panel supports more active recreational uses of the floodway for recreational and habitat conservation including wildlife viewing, boating, and fishing. Upstream pathways and wayfinding signs should be improved to encourage visitors to travel to the Lewis and Clark State Park in Onawa, Iowa.

At the east end of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge, the panel strongly supports redeveloping the Playland Park site for mixed-use development behind Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park. The panel also supports reconfiguring the I-480 interchange to improve access to Broadway and downtown Council Bluffs. The panel advocates for robust development at Playland that would support additional cultural and commercial uses to attract visitors. Furthermore, the panel supports the construction of a two-lane, low-speed river road connecting Avenue G to the Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park and south to Harrah's casino.

Downstream from the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge, the panel supports plans to add residential uses to the riverfront that will increase trail users and provide more eyes on the parks and open spaces. The panel recommends replacing the existing surface parking at Harrah's with a more natural landscape and thus reducing parking.





*Left and middle: An added streetcar connection and improved bus rapid transit will create opportunity for better public access to the riverfront.*

Closer to downtown Omaha, the panel strongly supports redeveloping several sites south of ConAgra that will add more rooftops to the riverfront and complete the River Trail's missing link to the Heartland of America Park and Lewis and Clark Landing. Jones Street and Pierce Street should become regional connections to the riverfront from the Old Market and Little Italy districts rather than simply a private connection for new residents of those districts.

The view back at Lewis and Clark Landing shows that the existing assets, as good as they are, lack sufficient context to make the riverfront vibrant and active daily as we have been emphasizing. Currently, only a limited number of residents, office workers, and retail businesses are within a five-minute walk (one-quarter mile) of the riverfront at Lewis and Clark Landing. Even a ten-minute walk (one-half mile) does not connect to a significant amount of residents or office workers. While the convention center has sporadic events during the week and the year, its entrance is turned away from the waterfront. Such orientation makes access to the riverfront difficult, especially without effective signs and wayfinding.

The core of downtown is three-quarters of a mile from the riverfront; using the riverfront daily is inconvenient for downtown office workers. Very little housing is located in this radius, and even Old Market is beyond a 15-minute walk, thereby ensuring that most visitors would drive rather than walk between the two destinations.

The panel's strong recommendation is that additional dense mixed-use development is crucial within the ten-minute walking radius of the riverfront to support year-round activity that will complement the current event-driven landscape. Dog parks and children's playgrounds are driven by local residents more than by regional visitors. This overlap of daily and seasonal uses will enliven an authentic and vibrant riverfront.

In addition, the panel strongly advocates for the streetcar system on 10th Street that will reduce the auto dependency of the riverfront and eventually allow for the removal of so much surface parking in the riverfront. More regionally, the panel advocates that future bus rapid transit routes



*Below: The panel recommends that the communities improve development within a half-mile, ten-minute radius of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge.*





cross the I-480 bridge to Council Bluffs and Playland Park. Such service would support transit use of the riverfront to complete trips and support transit-oriented development. Imagine visitors returning to Omaha on public transit after walking over the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge and visiting Playland.

As has been discussed previously, better connections are essential to create an active riverfront. Currently, only three access points exist over one mile to get from the north downtown to the north riverfront and the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge. The proposed pedestrian bridge over Riverfront Drive and the railroad tracks connecting to the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge, locally referred to as the “Baby Bob Bridge,” is a good start, but it is not enough. The panel recommends doubling the number of access points to truly make a seamless connection between park users and the riverfront. Without this access, the riverfront will remain dependent on unattractive surface parking for visitors.

The panel strongly recommends extending Capitol Street under I-480 to replace the current at-grade connection over the tracks, or simply to add a pedestrian connection over the tracks to Lewis and Clark Landing. This location provides spectacular views of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge and the Missouri River.

*The panel recommends improving the Capitol Street connection to the riverfront.*



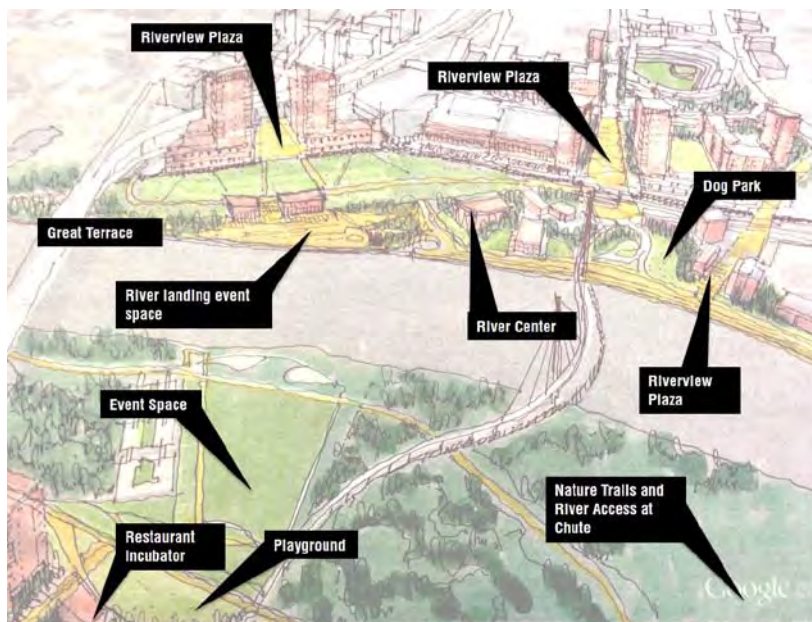
*A direct and visual connection from Mike Fahey Street to the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge (above) has the potential to enhance appreciation and connection to the riverfront from downtown, much like the Millennium Bridge (below) did between the Lower Downtown (LoDo) neighborhood and the South Platte River in Denver, Colorado.*



In addition, a direct connection from North Downtown Events District to the riverfront is necessary. The panel has seen several alignments for this connection and is particularly encouraged by the concept of the Baby Bob Bridge. Whatever design is created, the panel strongly supports a direct and visual connection from Mike Fahey Street over



GOOGLE EARTH



*These two images reflect how the panel envisions the conversion of current conditions (top) along the Missouri River to incorporate new uses and connections (above).*

the tracks with an open, wide land bridge providing views of the river and an elevated gathering place. Examples of such spaces can be found in Denver, Colorado, where the LoDo (Lower Downtown) District has been reunited with the South Platte River with a signature open space and bridge.

### Galvanize the Vision

What might an active Missouri riverfront look like? First, it would begin to convert the many large surface park-

ing areas (see lots A, B, and D in the image above) into development parcels that would create close-in residents, workers, and, ultimately, park users within a short ten-minute walk of the riverfront. Within the park, smaller parcels, now dominated by surface parking lots, would see new modest-sized cultural venues to add destinations for visitors and residents on both sides of the river. An expansion of the Omaha convention center would turn the center toward the river by developing over its loading docks with additional meeting and ballrooms overlooking the new park. Such expansion would add views from the structure toward the waterfront and camouflage the work zones of the building.

On both sides of the river, the various parks would become a singular destination: the Missouri River Commons. This vision builds on the major investments that have been made in North Downtown and the Playland Park area to create a premier neighborhood and visitor destination for Omaha and Council Bluffs. The Commons would be a shared and human-scaled public space spanning the river with a range of activities and uses that are attractive to visitors and residents alike and are activated daily.

Overarching principles of the creation, marketing, and use of the Missouri River Commons should be as follows:

- easy pedestrian accessibility using pathways and bridges that overcome the obstacles of train tracks, highways, and grade changes;
- activation of a network of trails connected on both sides of the river and to neighborhoods and attractions;
- vehicular streets that are essential for access, but designed for closure during large events and for traffic calming to ensure pedestrian safety; a small river road on the east side of the river that connects to Avenue G;
- new mixed-use development at a variety of scales that provides destinations for both visitors and residents to activate the park;



- new development that provides public parking to replace the excessive amounts of surface parking within the park;
- a range of public open spaces to support diverse events and activities in the Missouri River Commons such as places to play with one's children, to walk a dog, to run or bike, to attend a concert, to enjoy dinner, or to watch fireworks and places for visitors to find additional interpretive and cultural venues to provide a day's worth of activity to complement other attractions; and
- an expanded convention center with cantilevered ball-rooms and meeting space over the loading docks to hide the loading docks and to open people's eyes to the river.

# Priorities and Stewardship

**THE PANEL SEES AN OPPORTUNITY** to direct increased economic activity already happening in the region to the riverfront study area. Implementation of the proposed development strategy will require a series of specific actions—some of which can be clearly defined at this time and some of which will require more detailed analysis and thought by the project sponsors and partners. The panel thinks that the enactment of a local strategy should be made on the basis of the objectives to broaden the overall number of people coming to the riverfront; improve the perception and quality of the public realm for residents and visitors alike; and link the area to the neighborhoods, business districts, and other event spaces through well-established, linear connections. Flexibility is almost as important as the vision itself. New opportunities for development or investment will inevitably arise that cannot be fathomed today. Any plan for the riverfront must be appropriately paced and valued against the core principles agreed to.

However, activation along the riverfront is more than land acquisition and development. The panel unanimously concurs that without clear agreement of partnership between the two communities, any development plan will flounder.

The panel recommends that the two cities create a project steering committee. Each city must partner together through an assembled, independent group that will oversee the long-range visioning process. Staffed by members of each city's planning and development departments and composed of a public-private board of advisers or managed by a private third party, this group will help lead the visioning and planning process for the Missouri riverfront. This steering committee will work with Omaha and Council Bluffs to develop a mutually beneficial master plan for the riverfront and establish development goals.

In addition, this entity will help coordinate existing uses within the area and to mitigate any danger of competition for location, participants, and funding between these uses.

This entity need not be independent or self-financed at the start, but once the framework of a riverfront development plan is established, the two cities can consider the steering committee's future autonomous operations. Any physical improvement in the study area will have varying degrees of price and complexity. Once a vision is ready to implement, the panel recommends the two cities consider creating a special entity that will have the autonomy and responsibility for facilitating and managing real estate development in the riverfront area.

# Conclusion

**A COMMON THEME THROUGHOUT** the panel week was focus. The Omaha and Council Bluffs riverfront is a large geographic area, with numerous assets, projects, and opportunities. Therefore, attention must be paid so that initiatives are undertaken in context with the larger picture.

There are models elsewhere that could be instructive. In Memphis, the Main Street to Main Street Multi-Modal Connector Project is implementing a joint trails program that will span the Mississippi River from Tennessee to Arkansas. In St. Louis, the Missouri and Illinois legislatures passed identical enabling legislation to create a cross-river parks and recreation district, although the result was two identical districts and not a single entity. But the districts have fostered ongoing collaboration emphasizing projects that functionally and visually unify the Illinois and Missouri sides of the Mississippi River.

The timing for this Council Bluffs and Omaha initiative is good. The development of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge represents that in a very visible way. Even more important is a new spirit of mutual destiny between the two cities. The panel engaged with a number of people who

grew up in one city and now live in the other. The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce has initiated a multicounty approach to economic development. Regular meetings occur between the two mayors and their staffs. Metropolitan Area Planning Agency survey results indicate a growing interest in thinking regionally.

In the panel's opinion, the key is to strike while the iron is hot. So, keep moving ahead. To borrow from the mural the panel saw during its week in Omaha and Council Bluffs, "Don't Coast."



*The panel pauses at the base of the Omaha side of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge during a site visit.*



# About the Panel

## James A. Cloar

*Panel Chair  
Tampa, Florida*

Cloar has spent more than 40 years as a professional urban planner and not-for-profit manager. He led private not-for-profit organizations focused on revitalization in Dallas, Texas; Tampa, Florida; and St. Louis, Missouri, for a collective total of 26 years. In Dallas, his activities included catalytic initiatives that led to creation of the Dallas Arts District. In Tampa, his organization assembled land and funded predevelopment studies facilitating the development of a new sports and entertainment arena. Among his roles in St. Louis were funding, development, and management of a new public plaza.

Cloar has also been a partner/principal with a Maryland-based urban design firm and, before that, headed the Washington, D.C., staff of ULI. In 2010–2011, he served as the interim president of the International Downtown Association (IDA) and is a former IDA chair. He has been honored by the mayor of St. Louis with the 2006 “Quality of Life” Award and by IDA with the 2013 Dan E. Sweat Award for Lifetime Achievement in Downtown Leadership.

Cloar has been a consultant, adviser, or speaker to more than 50 cities across the United States and abroad. Recent clients include Wichita, Kansas; Burlington, Vermont; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Baltimore, Maryland. He has served on ULI Advisory Services panels for Raleigh, North Carolina; Orlando, Florida; New Orleans; Charlotte, North Carolina; Denver, Colorado; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Colorado Springs, Colorado, and recently chaired a ULI technical assistance panel in Bradenton, Florida. He is a past chair of ULI’s Public-Private Partnership Council and a former chair of ULI Tampa Bay.

Cloar is a Penn Institute for Urban Research scholar, on the board of directors of the National Civic League, a commissioner of the Tampa Housing Authority, and a trustee of the Henry B. Plant Museum. He is writing about civic leadership for the 21st century and is principal author of the ULI-IDA published book *Centralized Retail Management: New Strategies for Downtown* (1990).

Cloar has a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering and a master’s in regional and city planning, both from the University of Oklahoma. He resides in Tampa.

## Kevin Farrell

*St. Louis, Missouri*

Farrell is principal of Kevin Farrell Associates, an economic and community development consulting firm providing strategic direction, planning, and project management for developers, government agencies, and not-for-profit organizations. Farrell has devoted his entire 30-year professional career supporting revitalization of downtowns throughout the United States.

Before establishing his own company, Farrell served for 12 years as the senior director of economic and housing development at the Partnership for Downtown St. Louis where he led the Partnership’s programs to attract investment, expand commercial and residential development, support business recruitment and retention, improve infrastructure and public space, and enhance the overall economic vitality of downtown St. Louis. While at the Partnership, Farrell was also creator and co-founder of T-REX, an award-winning technology and design incubator and innovation center that established downtown St. Louis as a hub for entrepreneurial activity.

Before joining the Partnership, Farrell was director of special projects for the special-events division of Clear Channel Communications. He managed a portfolio of diverse projects for Clear Channel and several major clients including the newly merged AOL/Time Warner, the Simon Property Group, and St. Louis 2004.

For 17 years, Farrell worked for the Rouse Company, one of America's leading real estate development and management companies. At Rouse, Farrell served as a regional director of marketing and was responsible for leading many of the company's premier, mixed-use downtown properties including Westlake Center in Seattle; Pioneer Place in Portland, Oregon; Fashion Show in Las Vegas, Nevada; Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston; and South Street Seaport in New York City.

Farrell has previously served on panels for the International Downtown Association, the American Planning Association, and the International Economic Development Council. An advocate for the arts, Farrell has also served on panels for the National Endowment for the Arts and the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission.

## Donna Lewis

*Trenton, New Jersey*

Lewis is the planning director for Mercer County, New Jersey's Capital County. She has served Mercer County for 27 years. Geographically and economically diverse, the county comprises large contiguous agricultural areas, suburbs, classic small towns, and Trenton, the state capital. Her office is responsible for transportation and infrastructure planning; open space, historic, and farmland preservation (administering a dedicated tax that generates \$15 million annually); land development review and redevelopment planning; and anything else that comes along.

Lewis managed the award-winning restoration of the Louis Kahn Bath House in Ewing, New Jersey, the former site of the Jewish Community Center. This modern structure is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was featured in the movie *My Architect*, written and directed

by Nathaniel Kahn, the son of the architect Louis Kahn. Lewis participated in the team that built Mercer County Waterfront Park, home of the AA Trenton Thunder, a New York Yankees affiliate.

Lewis also served on the Transportation Research Board (TRB) Transportation Needs of National Parks and Public Lands Committee and the TRB Access Management Committee. She has participated in two National Cooperative Highway Research panels and in the national scan of best practices in highway access management. She is a past member of the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council, an advisory board to the U.S. secretary of agriculture. She is also a member of the Central Jersey Transportation Forum Steering Committee and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

Lewis has sponsored two ULI Advisory Services panels and served on Advisory Services panels and a Land Use Policy Forum.

Lewis holds bachelor's degrees in political science and English from the College of New Jersey and a master's degree in city and regional planning from Rutgers University. She is a New Jersey-licensed Professional Planner and a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners. She has also been an adjunct professor at the College of New Jersey. She is a court appointed special advocate for children in the foster care system.

## Robert Lewis

*St. Louis, Missouri*

Lewis directs redevelopment planning, economic planning, market analysis, and implementation assignments at Development Strategies, based in St. Louis. He was part of the team that created Development Strategies in 1988 after ten years with Team Four and two years with the St. Louis County Department of Planning. He was named president in 2000.

The focus of his professional work is analyzing the market, economic, and organizational forces that influence urban planning, economic growth, and real estate development.

His consulting services yield strategic recommendations for clients seeking to maximize economic value. Clients include local governments, private property owners, corporations, government agencies, nonprofits, and institutions all around the United States. Development Strategies has served clients in 42 states since 1988.

A native of Glencoe, Illinois, Lewis holds a master's degree in city and regional planning from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and a bachelor's degree in business economics from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He is a member of the Leadership St. Louis class of 1986–1987.

He is a certified economic developer within the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) and a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners of the American Planning Association (APA). He is also a former president of APA's Missouri Chapter and is immediate past chair of the Economic Development Division of the APA. He teaches the real estate redevelopment and reuse certification class for the IEDC each year. Bob has served on three previous ULI Advisory Services panels and chaired a ULI St. Louis Council technical assistance panel in 2011.

## Jan Minami

*Reedley, California*

Minami has focused on business growth and development for more than 20 years. She founded Jasmin Printing and operated it successfully for 11 years. As an entrepreneur, she became actively involved in the downtown Reedley, California, revitalization serving as a volunteer leader in the public and private sectors.

Intrigued by the dynamics of public-private engagement, Minami moved into the downtown leadership field, where she led business and property owner organizations in Visalia, California. She was adept at bridging the gap between the public and private sectors, creating projects that relied on collaboration to succeed. Her range of accomplishments includes a collaborative strategic plan uniting business owners, property owners, and the city; a popular new music festival; and improved business practices.

Minami next took on the challenge of a complete turn-around in downtown Fresno, California, gathering stakeholders to rescue a dying business organization, improve support of local businesses, and create strong foundations for events and community involvement. She spearheaded the formation of a business improvement district and its successful launch in January 2011.

After laying the groundwork for revitalization in downtown Fresno, Minami founded AMI Concepts to provide strategic solutions for cities, agencies, and organizations. Her knowledge of business, business relationships, and the partnership between business and communities fuels her dedication to a strong business community. Her specialties include business retention and expansion, downtown revitalization, and consensus building in the public and private realm.

Minami has a bachelor's degree in business administration from Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. She believes in continuing education through industry seminars and workshops. She is certified in grant writing and management through California State University in Fresno and business retention and expansion through the International Council on Economic Development.

## Alan Mountjoy

*Boston, Massachusetts*

Mountjoy is the manager of urban design projects at NBBJ. Before joining the firm in 1997, he served as a project manager for the Metropolitan District Commission's New Charles River Basin project in Boston. Mountjoy has more than 25 years of experience in the fields of architecture, master planning, and urban design. He has guided the firm's prominent large-scale urban design projects in Boston; Buffalo, New York; Cincinnati, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; Detroit, Michigan; Louisville, Kentucky; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Washington, D.C., and has served as project manager for projects that range from architectural elements and urban design for a \$110M highway renovation in Cincinnati to planned unit developments for the first major redevelopment in Historic Anacostia in Washington,

D.C. In his role as urban design manager, he coordinates teams of diverse professionals in architecture, landscape architecture, real estate economics, transportation planning, and environmental engineering. Three of his waterfront projects have received national AIA awards for design excellence. A native Californian, he holds a bachelor's degree in environmental design from the University of California at Berkeley and a master's of architecture degree in urban design from Harvard University Graduate School of Design. He has been a studio instructor at the Harvard Design School, a visiting critic at Northeastern University and the Boston Architectural Center, and lecturer at Tufts University.

## Jeff Sanford

*Memphis, Tennessee*

Sanford left the Memphis, Tennessee, Center City Commission (CCC) in 2010 after serving as the organization's president for 12 years. During his tenure, he led the CCC, the public and private agency with responsibility for coordinating the redevelopment of downtown Memphis, through a period of unprecedented downtown growth—about \$5 billion in new projects. In 2011, the CCC honored Sanford with its Lifetime Achievement Award. He is now working as an independent urban development consultant and has worked in various cities including Chicago; St. Louis; Houston; Oklahoma City; Hot Springs, Arkansas; and Oxford, Mississippi. He has had multiple assignments in Memphis.

Sanford is a former chair of the International Downtown Association, past chair of the Memphis City Council (and recipient of the Excellence in Government Service Award from the National Council of Christians and Jews), past chair of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, past chair of the Memphis Convention & Visitors Bureau, and a past chair of the Memphis in May International Festival. He has also served on the boards of the Greater Memphis Chamber of Commerce, Memphis Development Foundation, Memphis Urban League, Memphis Medical Center, Memphis Riverfront Development Corp., the Memphis Aerotropolis Steering Committee, and the Memphis Economic

Development Advisory Board. He currently serves as a trustee on the board of the Memphis College of Art.

Sanford grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, and is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

## Marcia Tobin

*Knoxville, Kentucky*

Tobin is a vice president with AECOM, in the Design + Planning practice. Formerly known as EDAW, the Design + Planning practice offers a holistic approach to guide responsible and productive use of the land and includes the practices of landscape architecture, architecture, master planning and urban design, environmental and ecological planning, and strategic planning and economic development.

Tobin's professional practice is focused on creating integrated multidisciplinary approaches and solutions to complex planning challenges, particularly at city, watershed, and regional scales. Her work has included (a) developing a master plan for Monterrey, Mexico, and its rehabilitation of open space networks, circulation, and vital storm infrastructure following hurricane damage suffered in 2010; (b) leading the update of the water supply management program for the East Bay Municipal Utility District, which serves more than 1.3 million people in San Francisco's East Bay communities; (c) using and refining a triple bottom-line-assessment tool to identify and prioritize green infrastructure opportunities for the San Francisco Public Utility Commission as part of the \$7 billion sewer system improvement program; and (d) assessing the vulnerability of transportation assets to sea level rise along the east boundary of San Francisco Bay.

Tobin has held several leadership positions with AECOM, including serving as managing principal of the San Francisco office, a diverse practice of more than 100 design and planning professionals; director of operations for the San Francisco office's Environmental + Ecological planning practice; and currently as lead of an integrated AECOM

team focused on increasing critical infrastructure resiliency in communities across North America.

Tobin is a member of the water policy board at the nonprofit organization SPUR, the San Francisco Urban Planning and Research Association, the American Planning Association, and the Urban Land Institute. She holds a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, a master's of science degree from the Graduate School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University, and a master's degree in geology from Columbia University.

# A ULI Advisory Services Panel Report



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