

*Guide to*  
**Innovative RFPs**



Mayors' Institute on City Design



THE UNITED STATES  
CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

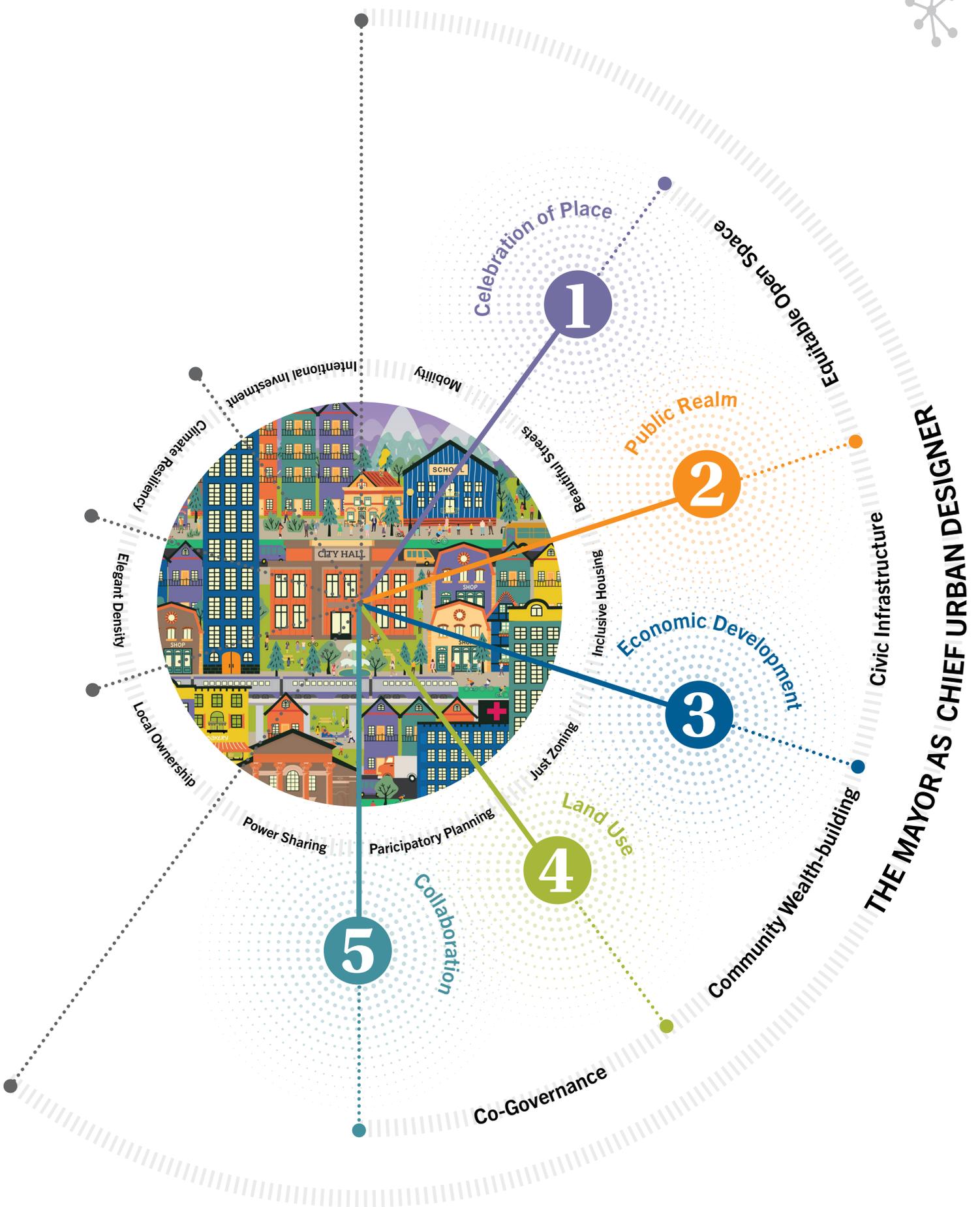
# About this Guide



As leaders of cities, mayors' chief responsibility is the well-being of their residents. The Mayors' Institute on City Design (MICD) understands that this demanding responsibility — coupled with environments where departments are often siloed, budgets are tight, stakeholders are skeptical, and there can be a lack of in-house knowledge of best practices and precedents — often yield projects that lack coordination and don't maximize potential benefits for their communities. MICD believes in the power of mayors as “chief convener” and “chief urban designer” to bring city employees, residents, and the development community together to break those barriers and solve problems.

One of the key tools to project implementation is the competitive process to award resources, procure services, or select partners known as Request for Proposals (RFP). In the spirit of providing mayors with the best tools and resources, we conducted a national scan of successful RFPs and have distilled the more successful elements and lessons of those into this guide.

This guide is a roadmap for impact. Whether this impact involves creating a pipeline of emerging design and development talent, concentrating investment in communities that need it most, or finding innovative ways to bring communities into shaping their built environment, the adoption of these best practices, coupled with the *Principles for City Design Leadership* can provide the necessary tools and decision points to achieve your desired impact.



# Principles for City Design Leadership

- 1** *Lead with design Design for meaningful change across your city*
- 2** *Lead to improve people's lives Design to connect communities*
- 3** *Lead for economic opportunity Design to create and capture value*
- 4** *Lead to foster health and resiliency Design to create a beautiful city*
- 5** *Lead collaboratively Design with all*

The Mayors' Institute on City Design (MICD) believes design is fundamental to shaping resilient, equitable, and thriving cities. Through a variety of programs, tools, and resources we equip mayors to be the chief urban designers of their cities. Mayors leave our programs engrained with a key understanding that design is a problem-solving tool. It's a galvanizer of people. It can illustrate a vision and establish the roadmap to activating it.

*The Principles for City Design Leadership* are here to help mayors center design, the built environment, and the well-being of their residents in everyday decision-making and processes. By leading with design, mayors gain a clear, values-driven lens for navigating complex choices that helps align policy, investment, and implementation around long-term public benefit rather than short-term pressures. These principles support mayors in shaping cities that foster health and dignity, expand economic opportunity, strengthen physical and social connectivity, and build resilient systems that endure.

Ultimately, the principles are intended to serve as a practical decision-making aid that mayors can return to again and again. They help mayors articulate priorities, evaluate tradeoffs, and steward the built environment in ways that produce beauty, equity, and shared prosperity for all residents, now and for generations to come.

**The Diagram:**

The diagram on this page is a logic model that represents the complex relationships between the different components of urban design, *the Principles for City Design Leadership*, and the power of the mayor as chief urban designer. While this depiction is static, these relationships are dynamic in practice and these relationships can come together in many different ways. When these relationships are thoughtfully composed, the outcome is good urban design for your city.



# 1 *RFPs and the Principles for City Design Leadership*

## **How the Principles can impact RFPs**

Through our work with mayors across the country, we have found the process of developing RFP's often becomes mired in competing interests, lack of clarity for the outcome of projects, and bureaucratic process. While a single study or guide cannot respond to every desired outcome we have heard from mayors, this guide takes national best practices that align with the *Principles for City Design Leadership* and condenses them into a roadmap for implementation.

Using this guide as a reference, in conjunction with the intentionally embedded Principles, will allow for the development of Requests for Proposals (RFPs) that align with the values of your administration and community, help guide the selection process, and help you to structure development or consulting agreements that improve the quality of the built environment for your residents.

## How to use this guide?

This guide is intended to help you interrogate your full RFP process for better outcomes. From the defining the challenge, to centering community values, to getting higher quality responses, to writing agreements that serve your community, every step presents an opportunity to step back, reevaluate, and move forward with clarity and conviction. The steps in this guide are not meant to be seen as a strict, linear implementation model. Rather, they are proposed for thoughtful consideration and sequencing that works best for your city and your project. The decisions of what steps to implement and how they best work for your city should be guided by the build environment outcomes you desire, such as:

- Community Wealth Building
- Elegant Density
- Co-Governance
- Beautiful Streets
- Inclusive Development
- Just Zoning
- Good Urban Design!

## RFP vs. RFQ vs. RFI

For simplicity's sake, this guide will focus on competitive processes to advance development and the procurement of professional services in the form of an RFP. However, there are different processes to achieve the above desired outcomes, based on the baseline knowledge and clarity of goals.

A first critical question that must be posed, is "are we ready for an RFP?" It may be worth considering a Request for Information (RFI) or Request for Qualifications (RFQ), if your administration finds itself wondering how its desired outcomes can be achieved or is not certain that there are partners in the private sector to engage.

For more on the key differences between the three, visit the U.S. General Services Administration's website for an informative slide deck:

[GSA Small Business Training: RFPs, RFIs, and RFQs](#). This deck provides a great overview of the key differences between the three different procurement strategies and when to use each.

See link: [www.gsa.gov/small-business/small-business-resources/training-resources/rfp-rfi-and-rfq](http://www.gsa.gov/small-business/small-business-resources/training-resources/rfp-rfi-and-rfq)



## 2 Elements of *Good RFPs*

### Why this project?

Why does it matter to your administration and your community that a site be redeveloped, or that this planning work take place at all? Each community will answer this question differently, but responses often reflect shared values such as “we need more open space,” “we need additional affordable housing,” or “this site has been an eyesore for too long.” Asking this question of yourself and your team creates an opportunity to clearly define the outcomes and values that will guide the site’s redevelopment in partnership with the community.

That partnership is essential to the project’s success. More than any single physical outcome, the trust built through the planning process becomes the most meaningful measure of success. This trust is developed through community engagement that is ongoing and responsive, rather than one-time or symbolic. It is also strengthened by transparency about the project’s challenges and limitations, including the scope of engagement, housing needs and deficits, legal constraints around mixed-income housing, and the level of investment the city is able to make.

Incorporating these community values directly into the text of the RFP is a critical step in this process. Doing so not only documents what matters to the community, but also signals to the design and development community that the city is serious about better outcomes and a truly transformative project. While the engagement process will vary based on each community's needs, it ultimately provides an opportunity to clearly articulate shared values and ensure they are a prominent and guiding part of the RFP. The timeline below is illustrative and highlights key milestones in the engagement and RFP development process.

## Engagement Timeline

### 1. Engage internally

The first step towards a successful RFP is to ensure alignment amongst city agencies and partners. This alignment includes identifying available resources for the RFP's execution (both capital and human) along with ensuring all parts of your administration are properly prioritizing the project. Consider establishing a working group of city staff carrying out the project

### 2. Document your assets

You are likely already investing in this community or have investments planned. How is the private sector investing? No investment is too small.

Focus your team on uncovering these investments (recent or planned), gather the data, and present it compellingly in an asset map.

### 3. Establish priority outcomes for the RFP

Review MICD's *Principles for City Design Leadership* to determine what outcomes are most important for your project. Equally important is to identify the principles that will guide your administration through the process. Make sure that your team understands these.

### 4. Build trust!

The success of your project will largely be determined by its ability to build trust with your community and stakeholders. Start by engaging with key stakeholders individually and/or in small groups. Consider assembling an advisory group of residents/stakeholders.

### 5. Celebrate the initiative

Re-think engagement efforts to include celebrations of community while introducing the built environment opportunity. Most importantly, don't hesitate to ask basic questions: Did we get it right? Is this the right scale? Are these the right uses? What did we miss?

### 6. Ask for what you want

Invest in defining the outcome for the project. Engage with interdisciplinary teams to translate the development potential of the site for re-development opportunities. Use this project as an opportunity to hire design professionals into your administration to lead these processes for you and to create a vision that is both beautiful and rooted in market reality. Define the physical outcome, while acknowledging the financial needs of the project.

Be prepared to state what your city will contribute to the project in the RFP. It is okay to include challenges and ask developers how they would address them — this helps you thread the needle about getting what you really want and need without being too prescriptive. If developers are not up to the task, it's best to find out earlier in the process.

### 7. Vision with the community

The process of visioning with community is a constant exercise of balancing what they desire vs. what is actually feasible, both in terms of existing or allocated resources and what the market can bear. There will always be tradeoffs and there needs to be space for these discussions. Ultimately, your commitment to the vision and the project's values will ensure that the project progresses.



### *8. Revise*

Build trust by showing your community that you listened. Changing course may be fine if the project stays financially and technically feasible. This will be an on-going conversation — this is where your process will be continuous and reflexive.

### *9. Verify*

The best vision is the one that can be implemented. Show stakeholders you listened and be prepared to discuss any elements of their feedback that are not feasible.

### *10. Engage the design and development community*

Ensure they are ready to receive the RFP and aware of your community's priorities. This is also an opportunity to build a pipeline of emerging and diverse talent. If this is a priority for your city, make sure it is documented in your RFP and work with the private sector and civic community to ensure that they can rise to the occasion.





# 3 *Put it together!*

## **RFP Implementation**

The RFP is on the right path! Doing a few more things up front will help you make the most of this process and save time in the long run. The RFP will let you gauge developers' or consultants' interest and capacity, and get you a shortlist of great potential partners.

### ***11. Produce the RFP***

The RFP should reflect your community's values, priorities, and desired outcomes. It should also be beautiful – invest in packaging the vision.

### ***12. Release and spread the word!***

Ensure that your potential respondents are ready to receive the RFP and respond appropriately. Every touch point is an opportunity to stress the values that are important to the RFP and subsequent project. Make the time to intentionally engage with trade associations in the private sector, the civic community, and other stakeholders that are relevant to the project. Invite these stakeholders to public meetings leading up to the release of the RFP, and consider hosting events and workshops that bring them to the table, including re-thinking typical RFP events like site visits and information sessions to better reflect the RFP's values-based approach and desired outcomes.

### ***13. Evaluation and selection***

The evaluation process is a critical part of the RFP process. The evaluation can take on many forms. In some instances, city staff working groups evaluate proposals and have even invited community members into the evaluation process. The evaluation process should ensure that the evaluation rubric is weighted toward accomplishing the principles and outcomes of the RFP. The evaluators should also be briefed on these at the beginning of the process to ensure that they clearly understand the task at hand.

### ***14. Making the award***

Avoid going immediately into negotiations: consider extending the selection process and soliciting detailed proposals from each of the shortlisted consultants or developers as this will save a lot of time and resources in the negotiations phase and you will get much better results. Consider a small compensation stipend for finalists to offset predevelopment costs. It would be a mistake to select a consultant or developer without having a clear sense of their approach or designs.

### ***15. Re-development agreements***

Sometimes well-intentioned municipalities lose the values-based approach of their RFPs during the negotiations phase. This could be due to deferring to city attorneys or staff feeling out of their depth in negotiations. The reality is that often legal language and processes are cut & paste. City attorneys should be briefed on the desired values and outcomes for a project and staff should feel empowered to integrate these into contracts and development agreements.

### ***16. Confirm with community***

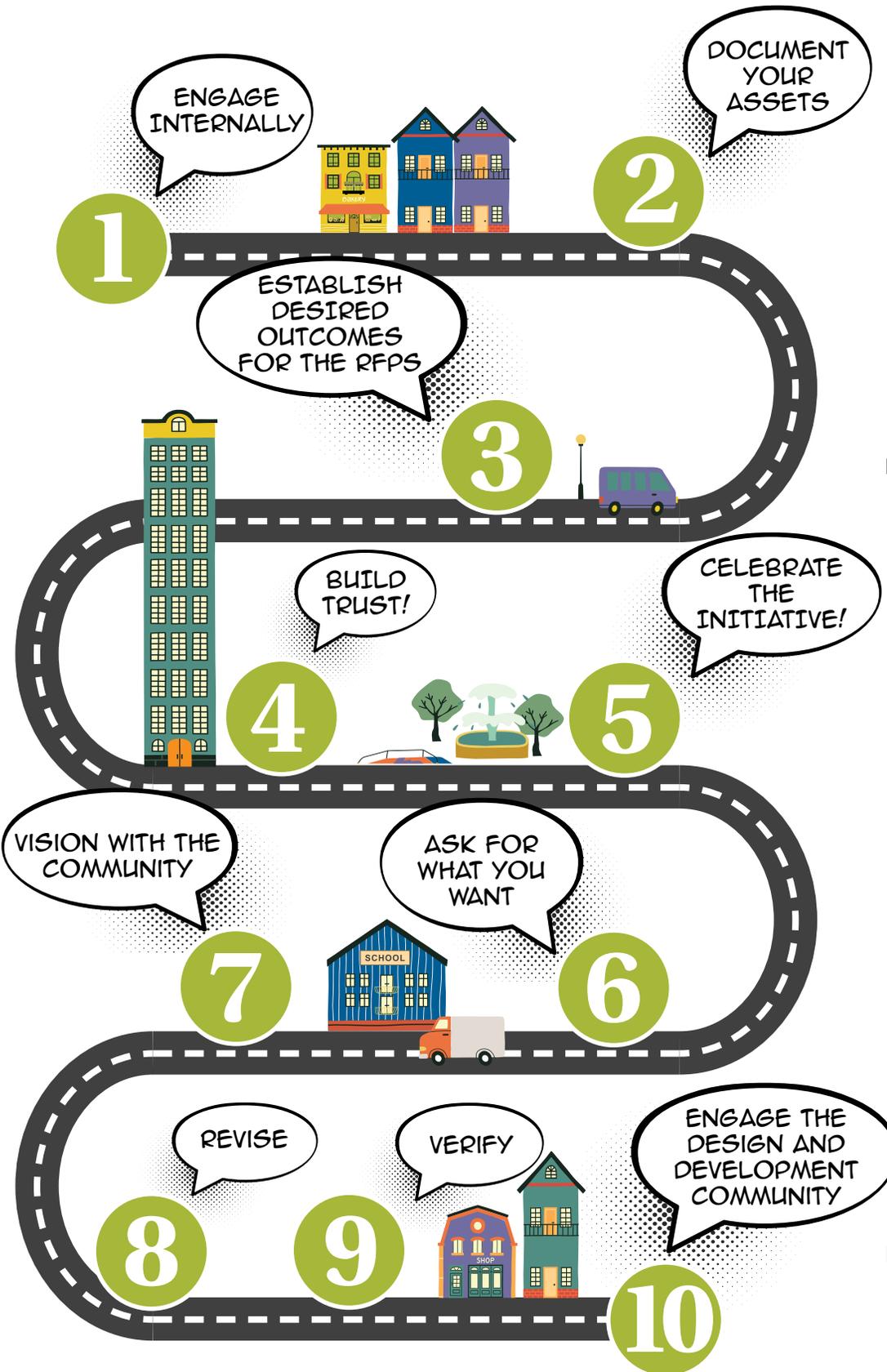
Introduce the selected consultant or developer to the community as a partner in achieving the project's goals and begin the work of refining the project and its scope in partnership with the community.

### ***17. Make headway***

Over the course of a project's development, your team will hear far more reasons why the work should not move forward than expressions of support. Some of this feedback will be valid and worth careful consideration. Clear project values should help keep the work focused, while still allowing room to re-conceive the project when doing so better aligns it with those values and intended outcomes. This flexibility should be intentionally built into contracts and agreements.

### ***18. Administration and evaluation***

Your evaluation rubric from step 13 should be designed with the goals and value of the project in mind, but also with an eye toward how the project will contribute to your administration's definition of success. The outcomes from *the Principles for City Design Leadership* can help provide metrics to track for this project and for your administration.



**PENSACOLA, FL**  
**HOLLICE T. WILLIAMS PARK**  
 Professional Services



**CHICAGO, IL**  
**INVEST SOUTH/ WEST**  
 Land / Real Estate Development



**DETROIT, MI**  
**BRUSH PARK**  
 Land / Real Estate Development





# *Case Studies*



# HOLLICE T. WILLIAMS PARK

## Professional Services

*Pensacola, FL*



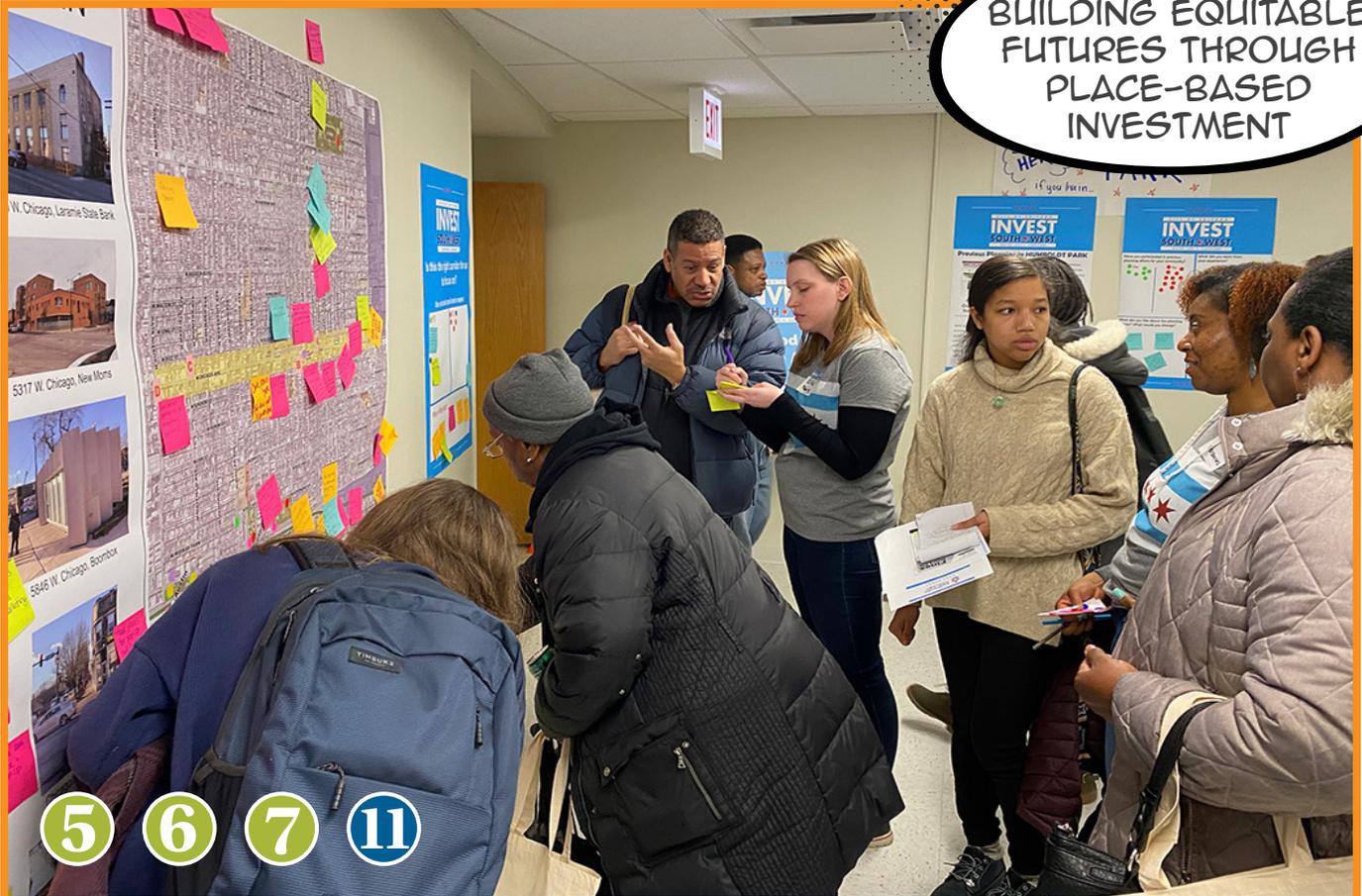
The *City of Pensacola* began the design process for *Hollice T. Williams Stormwater Park* in 2010. Underneath a highway that demolished most of a neighborhood and left the rest physically isolated from the city, a set of 100% design plans was produced that approached the problem primarily from an engineering perspective. Mayor D.C. Reeves inherited these plans when he took office, and recognizing the potential to improve public realm and serve this isolated community, he brought the project to MICD. As a result, his team embarked on deeper community engagement, unearthing community vision, hopes, and values. The team then centered those values in the RFP, making clear that the project should be transformative for the neighborhood and the city, and be a national model for design excellence. As a result, the RFP attracted world-class design talent, and the mayor has successfully sought state, federal, and philanthropic dollars for its construction.

# INVEST SOUTH/WEST

Land / Real Estate Development

Chicago, IL

BUILDING EQUITABLE  
FUTURES THROUGH  
PLACE-BASED  
INVESTMENT



Guided by the people who live and work within each community in Chicago, the *INVEST South/West strategy* has paved the way for more than a dozen major mixed-use projects, public-realm improvements, cultural installations, and new financial grants for small businesses and emerging developers. As part of developing the RFPs, the city engaged the local design community to graphically represent community visions, resulting in clear and compelling RFPs and developer responses aligned with those goals from the outset. INVEST South/West, former Mayor Lori L. Lightfoot's flagship economic development program, was supported by public agencies, corporations, institutions, and philanthropies through a coordinated approach to community wealth-building and long-standing improvement goals in underinvested neighborhoods. To date, the program has leveraged more than \$750 million in public investment to generate over \$2 billion in private and philanthropic investment across 10 communities.



# BRUSH PARK

## Land / Real Estate Development

*Detroit, MI*



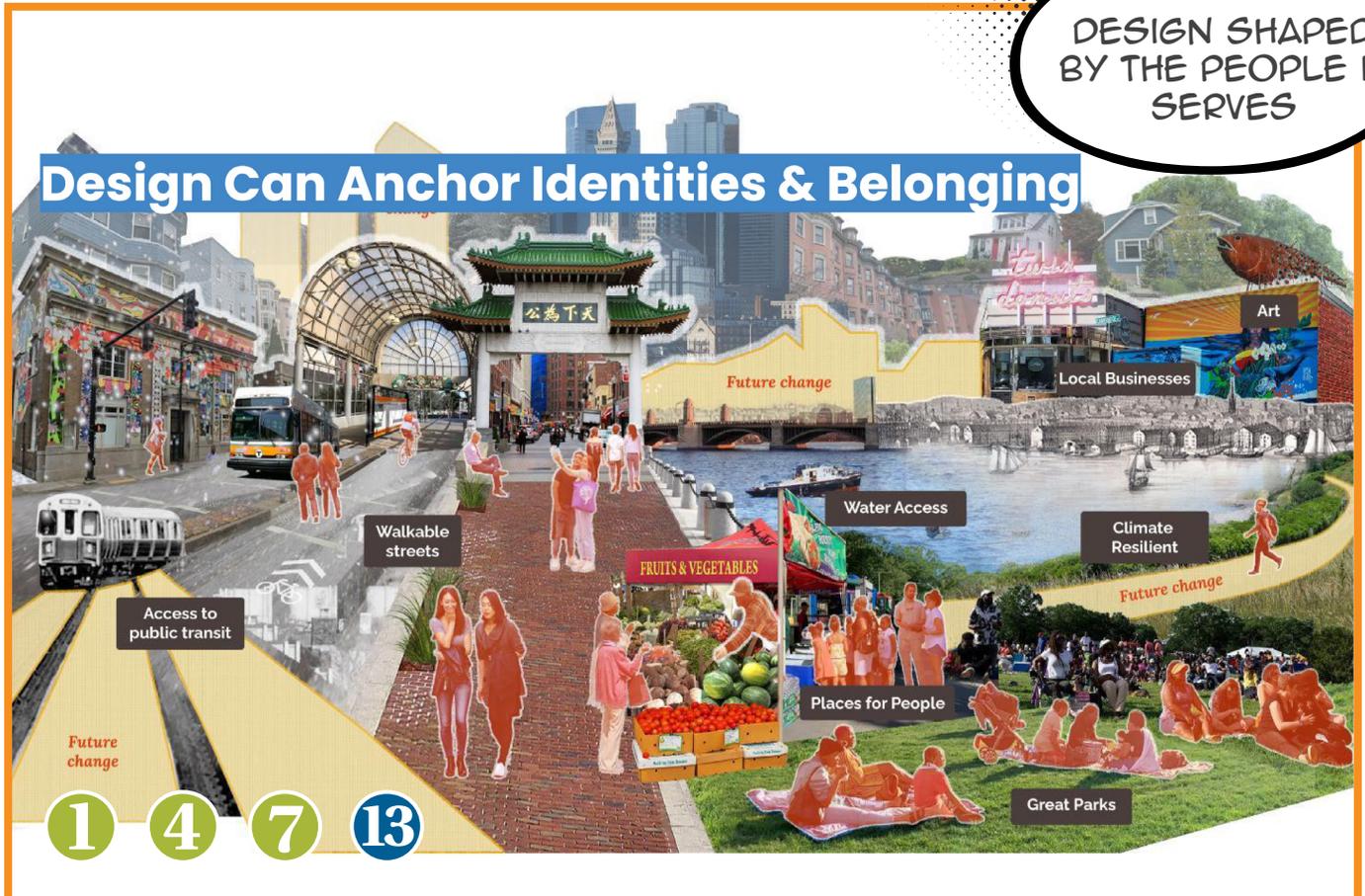
Featuring over 400 residential units distributed amongst approximately 20 buildings, the *Brush Park* RFP made use of its proximity to Downtown *Detroit* and Midtown, major sports stadiums, parks and entertainment, as well as the city's Central Business District to maximize density and bring vacant parcels of land back online. Through its redevelopment efforts the City developed a form-based code to visualize the preferred density for the sites and used competitive processed to leverage affordable housing units, in partnership with private development.

# BOSTON DESIGN VISION

Professional Services

*Boston, MA*

DESIGN SHAPED BY THE PEOPLE IT SERVES



The City of Boston Planning Department's Urban Design Division engaged with hundreds of Bostonians about what they love most about their neighborhoods to better understand what "good design" means to the people who call Boston home. The *Design Vision* is a statement of the principles that the city and its design professionals commit to uphold working on behalf of its communities, ultimately to elevate the quality of design in the city.



# NW RUBBER SITE

Land / Real Estate Development

*McMinnville, OR*

PATIENCE,  
PARTNERSHIP, AND  
PURPOSE - BUILDING  
FOR THE LONG TERM.



After purchasing a 3.6-acre industrial site in the NE Gateway District, the city sought a development partner to build a mixed-use commercial and residential development to revitalize this city center industrial neighborhood into a vibrant commercial and residential district. Taking the long view, the City released a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) and then a multi-phased evaluation process, including requiring semifinalists to take part in early engagement work through a community design charrette and a subsequent schematic design for the site. This strategic effort resulted in the city receiving more responses to this solicitation than any other in city history.

# ENGLEWOOD AGRO-DISTRICT

Land / Real Estate Development with Professional Services

*Chicago, IL*

FROM PARTICIPATION  
TO OWNERSHIP:  
COMMUNITIES LEADING  
THEIR OWN FUTURE



This nearly 2-mile rails-to-trails project in historically underinvested community is exploring a Public-common partnership (PCP), as an economic development strategy in which wealth created is shared by the community, rather than solely with the private sector or government. In this instance the Grow Greater Englewood (GGE), the non-profit steward of the trail is working with relevant public agencies, to gain ownership and control over the assets and resources that will impact their lives. The first phase of the project included privately funded and community-led Landscape Design Guidelines, a project whose goals challenge urban segregation and create an untamed, precious, and collective landscape. Only after these were established did the city step in to develop a Phase I engineering vision and pursue federal funding, with Grow Greater Englewood included as part of the consultant team for the RFP.



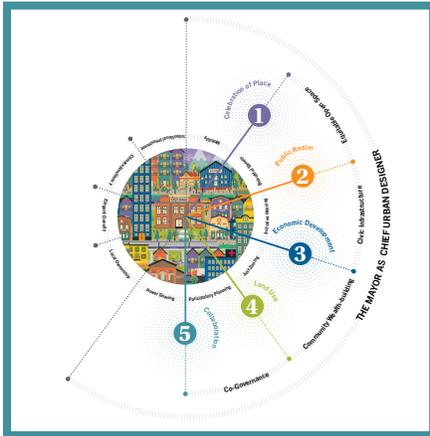
If you are *ready*  
to *take action*, the  
*Mayors' Institute on*  
*City Design* can help.



*Explore more MICD programs*

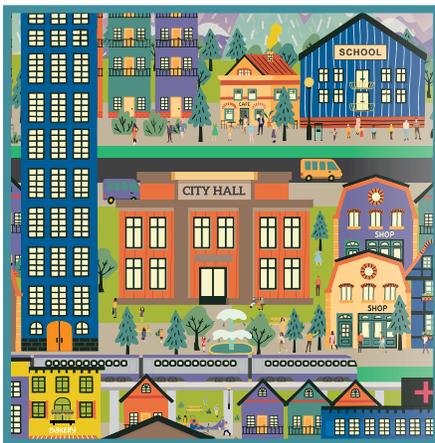
Discover how our programs can help your administration implement the *Principles for City Design Leadership*.

Learn more at [micd.org/designleadership](http://micd.org/designleadership)



### *How do I apply these principles?*

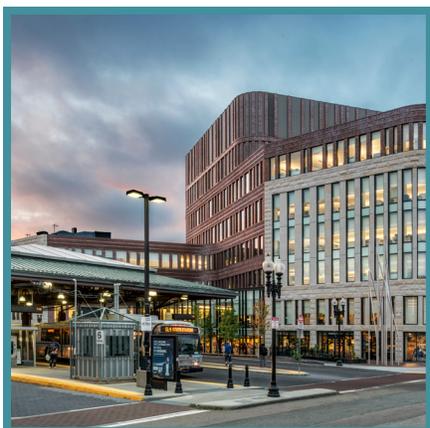
Explore the *Principles for City Design Leadership* impact on your city's policies and programs to unlock layered benefits that reflect community priorities.



Coming soon

### *Guide to Governing for Design Leadership*

Learn more about restructuring your administration for better design outcomes.



Coming soon

### *Guide to City Hall as Public Commons*

Learn more about how cities have re-invented their city halls and public buildings to better serve their cities and foster civic engagement.

Bolling Municipal Building (Anton Grass/ESTO, Courtesy of Sasaki)



## *Image credits*

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With a belief in the power of city design to transform communities, the Mayors' Institute on City Design (MICD) educates mayors to be the chief urban designers of their cities.

MICD is a leadership initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the United States Conference of Mayors. Since 1986, we've offered collaborative learning programs and resources to mayors in order to make a purposeful, positive impact on America.

Learn more at [micd.org](https://micd.org).

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**THE URBANISM BUREAU**



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