Principles for
City Design Leadership

Mayors' Institute on City Design

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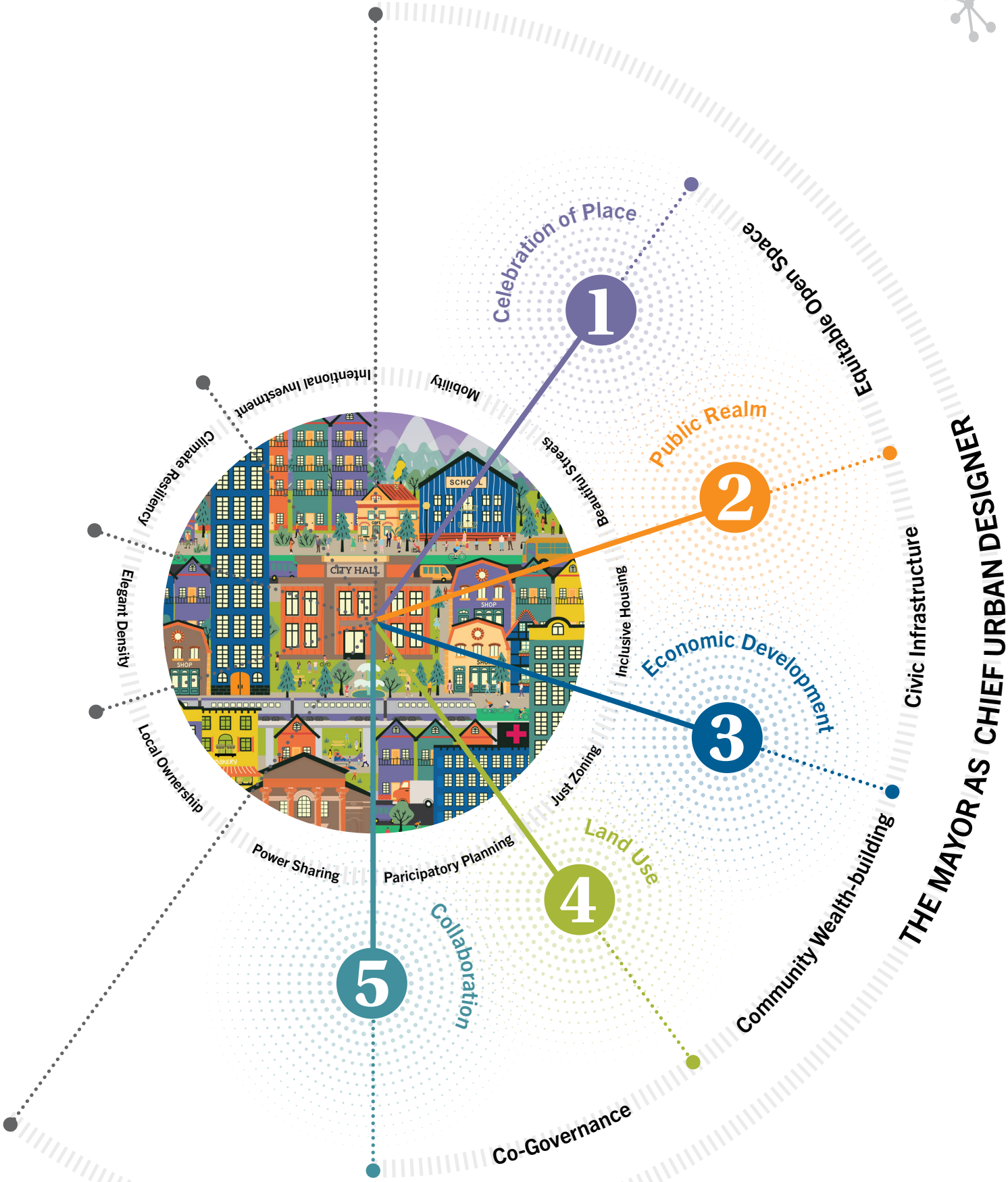
THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

Letter from the Executive Director

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.

Our programs reach cities of all sizes, all across the country. Urban design projects from coast to coast have been impacted by MICD, whether through planning that has occurred in Insitute Sessions or through alumni mayors that have gone on to build inspiring projects from the ground up. The work of MICD has been changing the fabric of America city-by-city for forty years. These principles and associated resources are meant to supplement MICD's programming to equip mayors and their teams in taking a step back to vision and ensure that their built environment projects meet the long-term needs of their cities.

Trinity Simons Wagner
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR


THE MAYOR AS CHIEF URBAN DESIGNER
1
Celebration of Place
Equitable Open Space
Civic Infrastructure
2
Public Realm
Beautiful Streets
Mobility
3
Economic Development
Inclusive Housing
Community Wealth-building
4
Land Use
Just Zoning
Co-Governance
5
Collaboration
Paricipatory Planning
Power Sharing
Local Ownership
Elegant Density
Climate Resiliency
Intentional Investment
CITY HALL
SHOP
SHOP
SHOP
BAKERY

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 communitites

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.

HOW DO WE EDUCATE CONSTITUENTS ON PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES?
HOW CAN WE IMPROVE OUR RFPS TO ATTRACT VALUES-DRIVEN DEVELOPERS AND ACHIEVE EQUITABLE RESULTS?
HOW CAN I STRUCTURE MY ADMINISTRATION TO CENTER QUALITY DESIGN AND PLANNING?
CITY HALL
HOW CAN WE INVEST OUR LIMITED PLANNING RESOURCES AND CAPACITY TO GUIDE THE DEVELOPMENT OF A DISTRICT WHERE WE DON'T OWN MUCH LAND?
HOW CAN WE REIMAGINE GOVERNMENT FACILITIES, LIKE CITY HALL, TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE AREA'S REVITALIZATION AND SERVE ALL RESIDENTS?
HOW DO WE GET THIS S*** DONE?
SHOP
SHOP
CAFE

01

Lead
with design

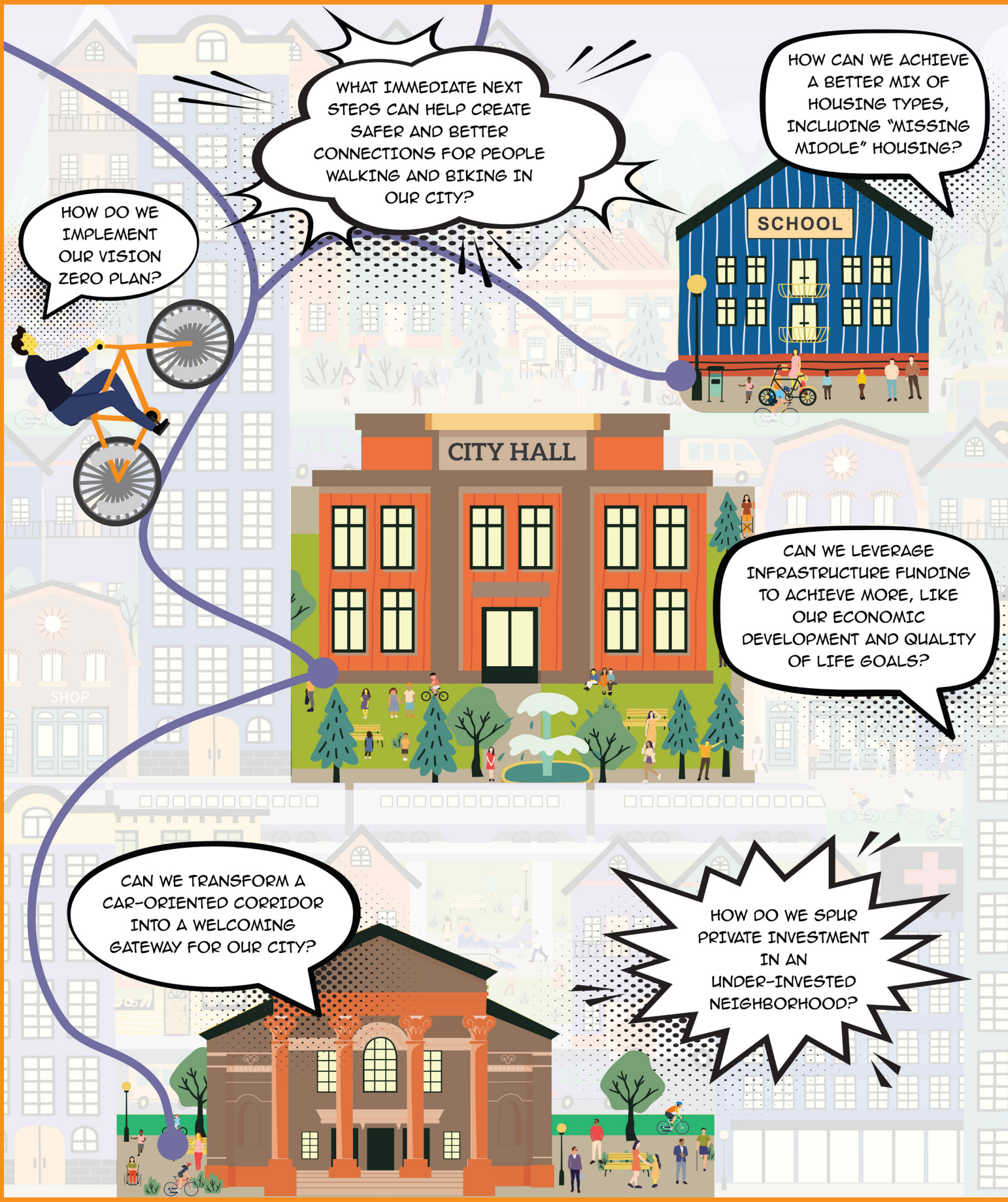
Design
for meaningful change across your city

Urban Design is a powerful tool that leads the way to purposeful, positive transformation in our communities and in our lives.

Lead by empowering city staff, the private sector, and communities to adopt a culture that values the positive outcomes of good urban design.

Your administration's commitment to leading with design and designing for meaningful change across your city will allow you to:

- Identify implementation pain points by conducting an audit of goals and projects from existing planning studies.
- Structure your administration and key advisor positions to achieve your desired planning and design outcomes.
- Value design expertise by integrating designers into the built environment functions of your administration.
- Elevate the discourse and implementation of urban design by creating internal design units.
- Create a culture that celebrates good design by showcasing good design work in your city.


HOW DO WE IMPLEMENT OUR VISION ZERO PLAN?
WHAT IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS CAN HELP CREATE SAFER AND BETTER CONNECTIONS FOR PEOPLE WALKING AND BIKING IN OUR CITY?
HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A BETTER MIX OF HOUSING TYPES, INCLUDING "MISSING MIDDLE" HOUSING?
SCHOOL
CITY HALL
CAN WE LEVERAGE INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING TO ACHIEVE MORE, LIKE OUR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE GOALS?
CAN WE TRANSFORM A CAR-ORIENTED CORRIDOR INTO A WELCOMING GATEWAY FOR OUR CITY?
HOW DO WE SPUR PRIVATE INVESTMENT IN AN UNDER-INVESTED NEIGHBORHOOD?

02

Lead
to improve people's lives

Design
to connect communities

As leaders of cities, mayors' chief responsibility is their residents' well-being.

Put people first and improve communities by offering accessible housing, mobility, and economic opportunity for all.

A commitment to leading to improve people's lives and designing to connect communities will enable your administration to:

- Consider user experience (for both residents and employees) by evaluating the delivery of city services.
- Educate residents around the built environment implications of policy to gain supporters of good urban design (e.g., zoning, density, open space, street safety).
- Maximize infrastructure funding to achieve safety and quality of life goals.
- Achieve multiple benefits by co-locating city services within city hall and in communities (e.g., libraries, community design centers, resident engagement offices, remote city halls).

HOW DO WE ATTRACT QUALITY DEVELOPERS WITH FRESH IDEAS TO RESPOND TO OUR RFPS?
HOW DO WE COMBAT THE NARRATIVE THAT GOOD DESIGN COSTS MORE MONEY?
DEVELOPMENT SEEMS TO UPSET EVERYONE! HOW CAN WE SET A NEW TONE?
CAFE
CAFE
CITY HALL
HOW CAN WE ATTRACT MORE VISITORS, WHILE PRESERVING OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE AND FOSTERING LOCAL PRIDE?
HOW CAN WE PREVENT GENTRIFICATION AS WE ATTRACT PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT?
SHOP
SHOP
BAKERY
WHAT ARE SOME CREATIVE WAYS TO DELIVER AMENITIES LIKE BANKS AND GROCERY STORES TO NEIGHBORHOODS IN NEED?

03

Lead
for economic opportunity

Design
to create and capture value

All cities have demand for desirable, amenity-rich places that build community ownership and cultural pride.

Design to unlock the impacts of development, ensuring multiple tangible and intangible benefits from every investment.

Your administration's commitment to leading for economic opportunity and designing to create and capture value will allow you to:

- Guide new development to meet as many community goals as possible and avoid unintended consequences.
- Leverage the talents of your civic and professional design community by calling on them to contribute their talents (e.g. forming an advisory design review panel).
- Buttress your approval processes with clear design guidance for the design and development community.
- Reimagine your city's procurement processes to integrate criteria around community values and impact.
- Embrace planning strategies that prevent displacement.

HOW DO WE BUILD ON OUR HISTORY AND NATURAL SETTINGS TO ENSURE THAT DEVELOPMENT FEELS UNIQUE TO THIS PLACE?
HOW CAN WE HELP OUR COMMUNITY HEAL FROM HISTORIC REDLINING, HIGHWAYS THAT DIVIDE US, AND OTHER PAST SOCIETAL HARMS?
INSTEAD OF ALL NEW DEVELOPMENT LOOKING THE SAME, CAN WE ATTRACT MORE DIVERSE AND BEAUTIFUL ARCHITECTURE?
CAN WE REIMAGINE AN OPPORTUNITY AREA AS A NEW DOWNTOWN OR NEW URBAN DISTRICT?
CITY HALL
SHOP
SHOP
HOW CAN WE RECOVER FROM A NATURAL DISASTER AND/OR PLAN FOR INCREASINGLY SEVERE WEATHER EVENTS IN THE FUTURE?
HOW CAN OUR PUBLIC SPACES BETTER FOSTER HUMAN INTERACTION, CREATING STRONG SOCIAL FABRIC AND AN AUTHENTIC SENSE OF PLACE?

04

Lead
to foster health and resiliency

Design
to create a beautiful city

Thriving cities are resourceful, sustainable, regenerative, and ever-changing.

Design adaptable cities that enrich everyday life with visible beauty and opportunities for fulfillment.

Your administration's commitment to leading to foster health and resiliency and designing to create a beautiful city will allow you to:

- Adapt to ever-changing needs for housing and infrastructure (both physical and social) as your city evolves.
- Gain a better understanding of how your land use patterns may be harming your community.
- Celebrate your city's unique history and culture through policy and positive development outcomes.
- Reform your city's development codes to plan for uncertain futures and system shocks.
- Invest in places and projects that foster human interaction and create a strong social fabric.

HOW CAN WE BUILD PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THIS PROJECT AND ENSURE A RESULT THAT THE COMMUNITY LOVES?
HOW DO WE CREATE COMMUNITY BUY-IN, GIVEN HISTORIC DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT?
CITY HALL
WHAT SHOULD WE DO IF/WHEN THERE IS RESISTANCE TO OUR VALUES-ORIENTED, DATA-DRIVEN WORK?
HOW CAN WE BUILD TRUST WITH RESIDENTS NOW, WHEN EVEN NEAR-TERM PROJECTS TAKE TIME?
HOW DO WE DESIGN OUR PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES TO TRULY INCORPORATE THE VOICES AND IDEAS OF THOSE WE SERVE?
WHAT ARE SOME CREATIVE WAYS TO SHARE OUR SUCCESSES?
CAFE
SHOP
BAKERY

05

Lead collaboratively

Design with all

We believe leaders elevate the people around them.

Facilitate the connection of diverse individuals and perspectives to co-create well-rounded solutions.

Your administration's commitment to leading collaboratively and designing with all will allow you to:

- Build a positive narrative around planning and development successes in your city.
- Share power with your constituents and acknowledge past sources of mistrust in order to build trust.
- Redesign engagement models for public interaction to ensure diverse participation.
- Streamline approvals and create structures that promote inter-agency coordination.
- Implement both long-term planning and built work that reflects the design priorities of residents.

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

Guide to Innovative RFPs

Craft better RFP's to ensure the design and equity outcomes that are important to your residents.

Hub 32 (Brooks + Scarpa and Studio Dwell Architects)

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 Grassl/ESTO, Courtesy of Sasaki)

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.

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THE URBANISM BUREAU

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