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Sub-Area 3-A: South Alpine Avenue
Future Land Use Plan
2007 Master Plan Update

City of Walker, Michigan



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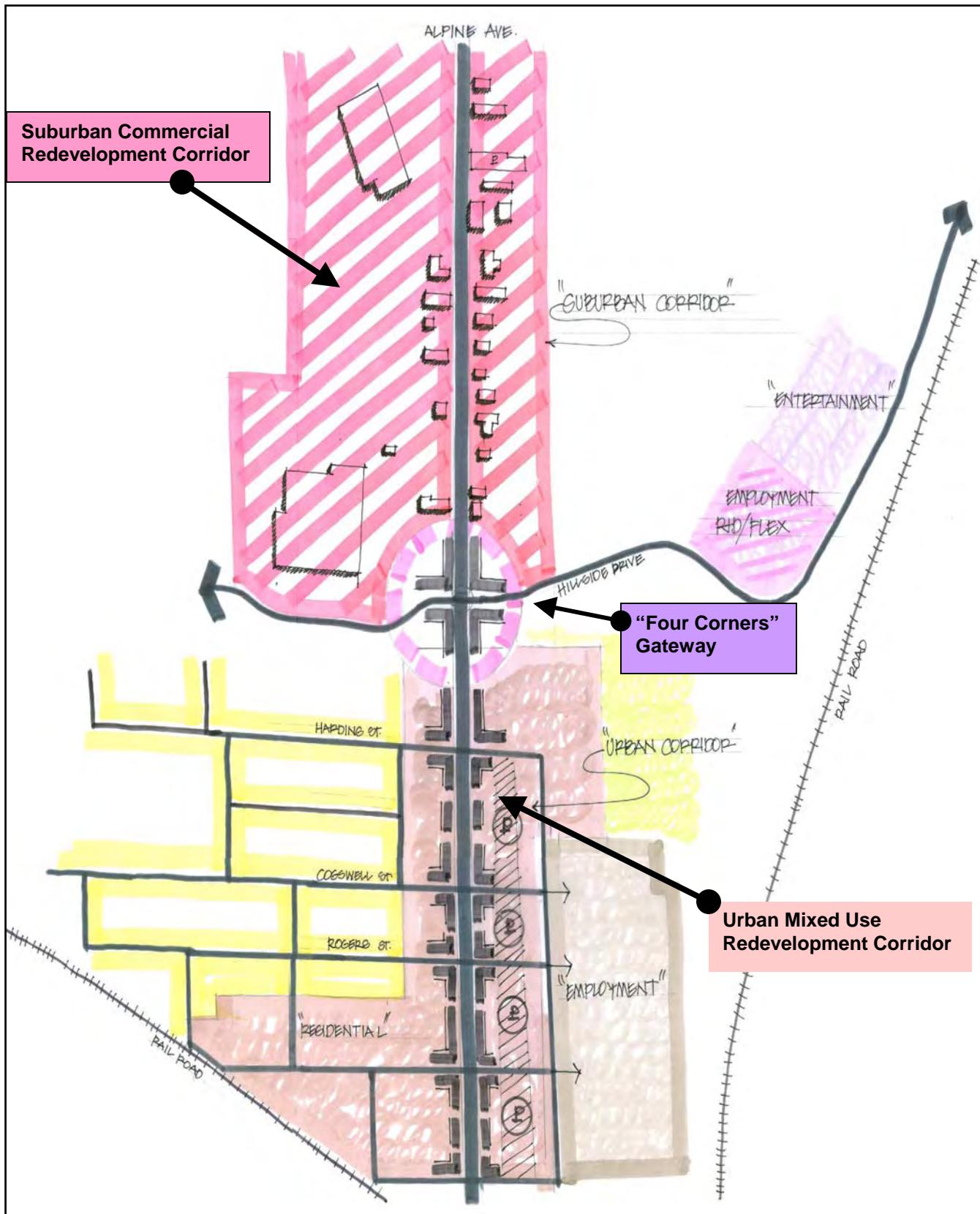


Figure 1: Sub Area 3A – South Alpine Avenue Future Land Use Plan



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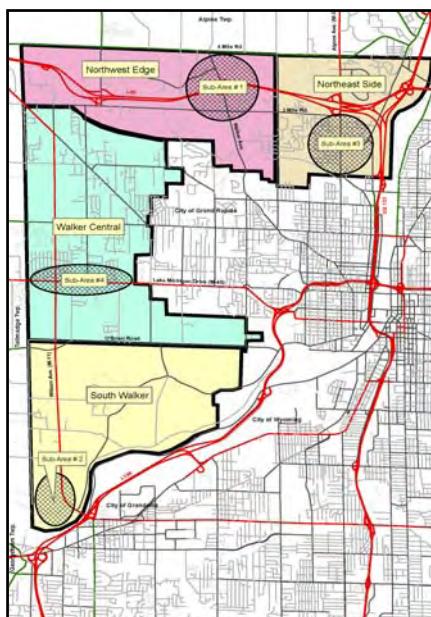
Introduction

The City of Walker has undertaken an update of its 1998 Master Plan with an over-riding goal to create a guidebook for future land use decisions that will be understood and supported by the community at-large. Much of the 1998 Plan remains valid. However, various planning issues have arisen since then that require additional review. To that end, four Sub-Areas have been selected by the Walker City and Planning Commissions for detailed study, including (see Figure 2 - Neighborhood Map, below):

- ❖ Sub-Area 1 -defined by Four Mile and Three Mile Roads and Bristol and Fruit Ridge Avenues.
- ❖ Sub-Area 2 - located along Wilson Avenue adjacent to I-196.
- ❖ Sub-Areas 3A - located near the Ann Street and Alpine Avenue corridors and 3B – located east of Bristol Avenue to Alpine Avenue.
- ❖ Sub-Areas 4A - located along the Lake Michigan Drive corridor in Standale between Wilson Avenue and Kinney Avenue and 4B - located on the south side of Lake Michigan Drive, west of Wilson Avenue and north of O'Brien Road.

These four general Sub-Areas reflected the four disparate “neighborhoods” contained within the City of Walker. There are effectively four different communities within the borders of the City of Walker. The 2006 Master Plan Update process sought to work within this reality to better address local issues.

Together, the planning process and the resulting land use recommendations for these Sub-Areas provide a sound foundation on which to base future decisions, while at the same time providing effective implementation measures that accurately reflect community desires. Other actions that may be undertaken as a result of this effort are an update to the City’s Zoning Ordinance, Parks and Recreation Plan and Capital Improvements Plan.



Although elected officials adopted the Sub-Area plans for the City of Walker, the public played an important advisory role in this process, providing input and acting as an effective sounding board for both the Planning Commission and the City Commission. The City of Walker’s ultimate goals for public participation were:

- ❖ Provide the public with an opportunity to participate and be heard.
- ❖ Make sure the process was fair.
- ❖ Respect everyone’s ideas and opinions.

Figure 2 – Neighborhood Map



The master plan update process was originally designed to encourage citizen participation at two junctures. The first would occur during an initial planning phase for each Sub-Area during a Community Forum, where the public would be given the opportunity to learn about the process, identify relevant issues and opportunities, learn about the context and physical parameters for each area, and participate in the development of land use and planning concepts.

Planners, designers and members of the Walker City and Planning Commissions would use results from these Forums to develop an initial land use concept for each Sub-Area that would be later tested and evaluated by the public.

The second opportunity would occur when, based on the outcomes of the previous public meeting, future land use concepts would be presented and discussed. During this second round of Community Forums, the public would have the opportunity to comment and provide opinions. These comments would prove helpful in completing the final future land use plan for each Sub-Area.

This elaborate and ambitious process was only used to its fullest extent for Sub-Areas 1, 2 and 3B. Budget restraints required that the other Sub-Areas be managed using a modified version of the originally intended master plan update process.

The process for Sub-Area 3A was modified to include public input after the redevelopment concept alternatives had already been generated. While this was a slightly abbreviated process, it still provided citizens an opportunity to review proposed plans and a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) exercise.

Citizens provided comments and concerns at a public meeting (held at the former Lear Plant on Alpine Avenue) that were ultimately used by the Planning and City Commissions in their deliberations and final decisions. Although written comment cards were offered to all 75 citizens at the meeting, none were returned.

Sub-Area 3A

Sub-Area 3A focuses on the Alpine Avenue corridor between I-96 on the north and the city limits on the south. It is unique from the other Sub-Areas because of its proximity to downtown Grand Rapids and the I-96 and US-131 corridors; that it contains a broad array of concentrated land uses; that the age and condition of infrastructure and existing development is mature; that it is economically challenged due to the loss of major employers; and that it is surrounded by mature residential neighborhoods that can help support current and potential commercial, industrial or mixed use developments. Sub-Area 3A is also near natural features that can serve as key recreational destinations, such as Indian Mill Creek and the Grand River.



Figure 3 – Sub-Area 3A

Sub-Area 3A is being studied as part of a broader planning effort, Using Regional Collaborations and the Hidden Assets for Urban Revitalization, by the West Michigan Strategic Alliance (WSMA), in concert with the Grand Valley chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA Grand Valley). The results of a design and planning workshop for this area, held January 27-29, 2005, were shared at three separate presentations for each of the three communities that make up the Grand Rapids Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) – Grand Rapids, Holland and Muskegon. The ongoing, intergovernmental planning effort, known as GrandWalk, has served as an important resource for the Sub-Area 3A master planning effort.



Existing Sub-Area 3A Conditions



Figure 4 – Looking South on Alpine Avenue from Hillside Pedestrian Overpass

Alpine Avenue south of I-96 is best characterized as an aging business corridor. Many properties are in decline and new investment has taken the path of least resistance, occurring to the north of I-96.

However, significant private investments have recently been made in the corridor, which could lead to positive change. Examples include a major upgrade to the Meijer store and the proposed transformation of the closed Lear Plant.



Figure 5 – Looking Northwest on Alpine Avenue from Hillside Pedestrian Overpass

Sub-Area 3A businesses are supported by existing infrastructure, including public utilities, streets and railroads. A potential labor force lives in surrounding residential neighborhoods.

The landscape features rolling topography that flattens into the Indian Mill Creek and Grand River floodplains. Existing and proposed pedestrian and bike paths are, or will be, in close proximity.

Current Issues

The Alpine Avenue corridor south of I-96 developed over many years with little forethought given to land use planning. This has led to the establishment of some incompatible land uses abutting or in very close proximity to one another.

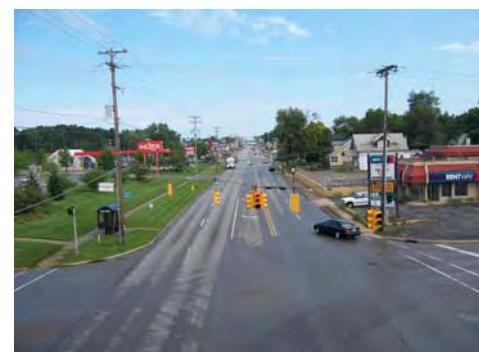


Figure 6 - Looking North on Alpine Avenue from Hillside Pedestrian Overpass



Because of this incompatibility, much of the housing stock in these “transition” areas is of modest quality, as are many of the commercial and industrial uses.

Further stressing the area is the closing of the Lear Plant. As a former large employer, Lear had a synergy with many surrounding businesses. The economic effects are, therefore, felt by not just those who lost their jobs at the factory, but also by those owning and operating nearby businesses.

As stated in the GrandWalk study, the Sub-Area lacks a cohesive identity or sense of place. General public concern is that Sub-Area 3A will decline without a clear vision and plan for restoration and reinvestment.

In order to establish a framework for a future land use plan, it helps to clearly spell out the specific needs of an area before attempting to create a set of goals and implementation tools. According to the GrandWalk studies, Sub-Area 3A needs to:

- ❖ Enhance the business climate
- ❖ Increase sustainability of housing
- ❖ Soften transitions between uses
- ❖ Extend road and service drive access into sites
- ❖ Establish gateways and an identity
- ❖ Enhance/develop social centers
- ❖ Address social issues
- ❖ Enhance and protect natural feature assets



Figure 7 – Former Lear Plant

Unique Strengths

After pointing out area needs, it is good to assess existing strengths and future opportunities. Some of the following are either located outside of the Sub-Area or do not directly apply to just South Alpine Avenue. However, the general area does have a number of attributes that should be targeted to serve as catalyst projects or energized to their full potential. The following assets are attributable to Sub-Area 3A:

- ❖ Well-kept, urban residential neighborhoods with quality employees
- ❖ Future GrandWalk Bike Trail Connector
- ❖ Redeveloping former Lear Plant
- ❖ Topography that provides natural edges and vistas
- ❖ Proximity to downtown Grand Rapids
- ❖ Local, family-owned businesses
- ❖ Grand River access and greenbelt opportunities



- ❖ Indian Mill Creek access
- ❖ Excellent highway access
- ❖ Neighborhood schools
- ❖ Major commercial anchors

Goals and Concepts

The ongoing GrandWalk study recommends a number of valuable goals and concepts to improve the entire area south of I-96 and into the City of Grand Rapids. However, some study goals directly pertain to Sub-Area 3A and should also be incorporated in this master plan update. They include:

- ❖ Recognition of existing neighborhoods
- ❖ Softening transition between disparate land uses
- ❖ Interconnecting streets and service drives between businesses
- ❖ Establishing a gateway at Hillside Drive
- ❖ Creating a local business association
- ❖ Continuing to support neighborhood watch groups
- ❖ Enhancing/developing social centers and dealing with urban social issues
- ❖ Enhancing access to and protection of natural features

1998 Master Plan – Future Land Use Map

The 1998 Walker Master Plan and its Future Land Use Map projected a continuation of the current uses and development patterns along the South Alpine Avenue corridor and its adjacent neighborhoods.

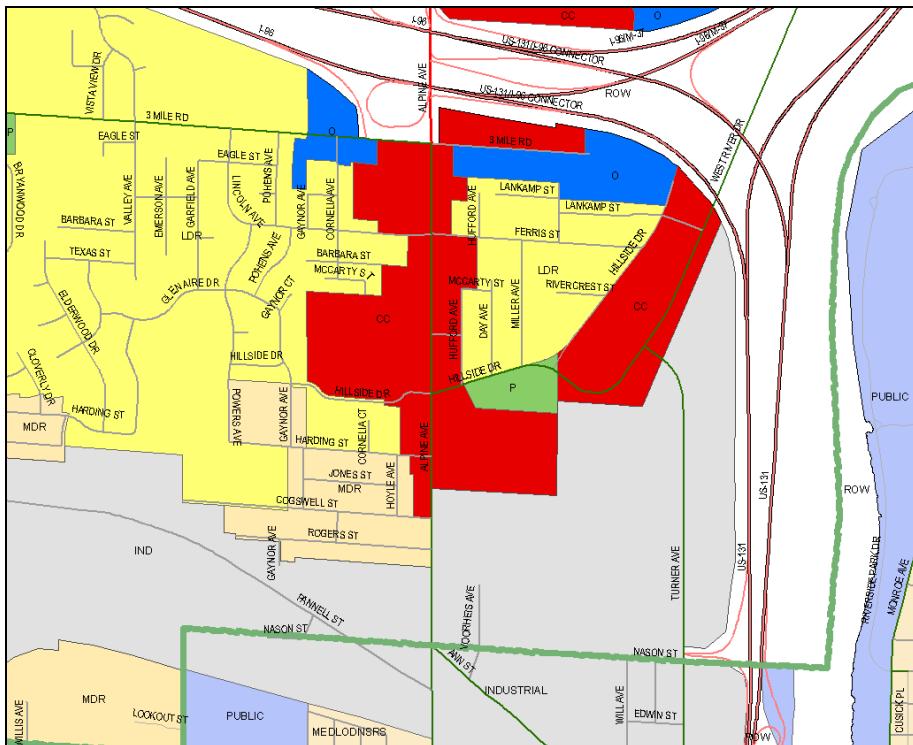


Figure 8: 1998 Master Plan – Future Land Use Map



2006 Master Plan Key Concepts

Alpine Ave. North of Hillside Drive

- ❖ The City of Walker should promote the redevelopment of a high quality commercial corridor on Alpine Avenue north of Hillside Drive. While suburban in character, its redevelopment should follow the best design practices of such an environment, including:
 - Buildings with architectural character, that relate to the street, that are constructed of durable, high quality materials such as brick, that contain ample windows to avoid blank walls and increase street appeal and that have clearly defined and articulated entrances.
 - Professionally designed, urban, landscaped parking lots that are not over-illuminated.
 - A clear hierarchy of commercial signs that are appropriately scaled and do not overwhelm the streetscape. Ground signs are preferred.
 - Streets and service drives that allow convenient and safe access from business to business without traveling back onto Alpine Avenue.
 - A complete system of interconnected sidewalks from neighborhoods to destination points.

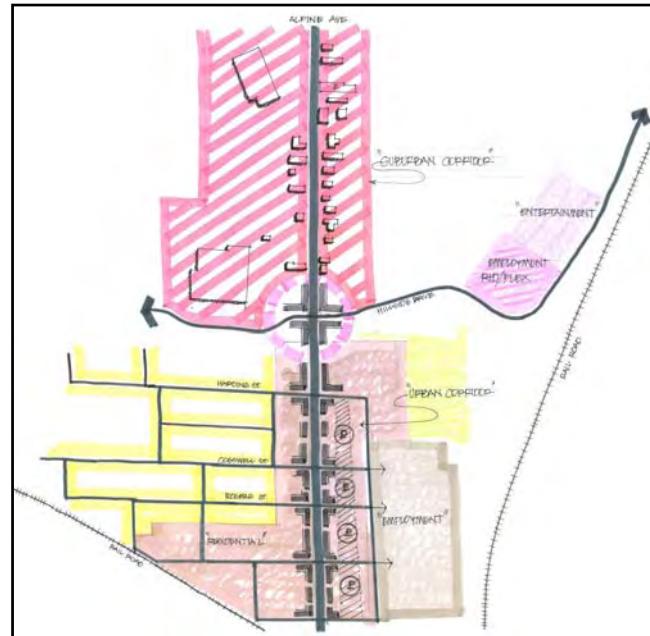


Figure 9 – See Figure 1 for details



Figure 10 – Future Streetscape for Alpine Ave. North of Hillside.



- ❖ Owners of the Delta Plex should be encouraged to keep their site functioning as an entertainment venue. The City of Walker should permit under-utilized onsite parking lots to transition to mixed-use employment centers. Shared parking should be emphasized to meet the different peak parking needs of these uses.

Alpine Ave. South of Hillside Drive

- ❖ The City of Walker should partner with landowners and local businesses to redevelop the Alpine Avenue corridor south of Hillside Drive as a traditional, mixed-use area containing:
 - Multi-story, brick buildings fronting on Alpine Avenue that accommodate residential or office uses on upper floors and retail on the ground floor. The ground floors should achieve a high degree of transparency via glass windows and doors to improve street appeal and create visual interest.
 - Development of higher density residential uses that allow a blend of different types of homes, ranging from small lot single-family to townhomes and flats in new neighborhoods.
 - Recreation of traditional development patterns that are typically found in older mixed-use neighborhoods, including:
 1. Two and three story buildings located at or near the Alpine Avenue sidewalk.
 2. Short, walkable blocks and interconnected streets with sidewalks to promote pedestrian freedom of movement.
 3. Residential garages that are located in the rear yard or are set back behind a line extending across the front façade of a building.
 4. Orientation of buildings toward public streets, with parking lots either to the side or behind buildings at the center of a block.
- ❖ The City of Walker should support ongoing redevelopment efforts for the former Lear Plant, emphasizing the creation of new jobs, new, interconnected public streets (Roger and Voorheis), internal service drives, urban landscaping improvements and sharing of parking lots with new uses fronting on Alpine Avenue.



Figure 11 – Future Alpine Ave. Streetscape South of Hillside



Figure 12 – Future Alpine Ave. Streetscape for Former Lear Site

Hillside Drive and Alpine Avenue Intersection

- ❖ The City of Walker should partner with landowners and local businesses to create a “Four Corners” gateway intersection at Alpine Avenue and Hillside Drive. The City should permit taller buildings and higher intensity uses at this intersection, consistent with the development pattern proposed for Alpine Ave. south of Hillside Drive.

Such a gateway intersection would help create an identity for Sub-Area 3A, signaling the transition from a suburban commercial corridor to a mixed-use urban environment.

Major intersection improvements could include re-design as a high-capacity, modern round-a-bout. At the very least, the intersection should be reconstructed using traffic calming measures to facilitate pedestrian crossings and a refuge area for access to the Route 9 Alpine Avenue bus.



Urban Design Template

- ❖ The City of Walker should consider amending its zoning ordinance to regulate the proposed urban redevelopment plan noted above for the area along Alpine Avenue south of Hillside Drive and the “Four Corners” intersection.

Such a new ordinance could follow the general principles of a form-based zoning code, combined with essential features of a traditional, Euclidean ordinance. The result would be a composite or hybrid zoning district.

The ordinance could require developers to construct a traditional, urban development pattern. The ordinance could also maximize property values by allowing more of a given property to be developed, thereby lessening the amount of land dedicated to suburban style setbacks.

Basic components of a traditional, urban development pattern are shown below on **Figure 13**.

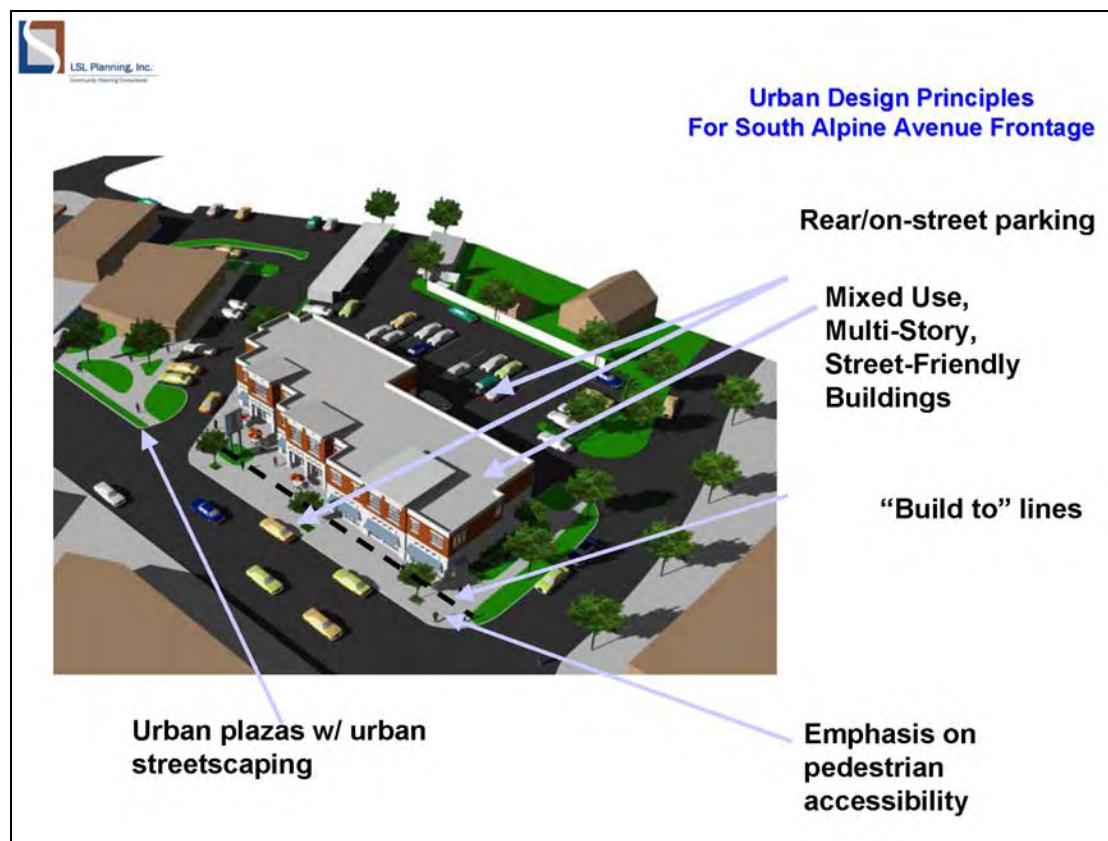


Figure 13 – Basic Urban Design Components



Policy Recommendations For Implementation

1. The ongoing **GrandWalk** study process has recommended the cities of Walker and Grand Rapids consider entering into cooperative agreements leading to the financing and project management of the physical, social and economic changes envisioned in these master plan concepts. The planning commissions and governing bodies of both cities may consider an agreement on the **policy objectives** included in these concepts.
2. The City of Walker should consider the creation of a **Corridor Improvement Authority** along Alpine Avenue. State of Michigan Public Act 280 of 2005 establishes enabling legislation for the creation of Corridor Improvement Authorities along aging business corridors. South Alpine Avenue should be strongly considered for use of this urban revitalization tool.

Funding mechanisms such as **Tax Increment Financing Districts and Special Assessment Districts** could be used to complete street and service drive improvements, drainage upgrades, landscape upgrades and improved pedestrian safety and access. In addition, the establishment of a South Alpine Avenue Corridor Improvement Authority could create a local business association. Such an association could promote communication between businesses, landowners, citizens and the City, thereby laying the foundation for a new identity for the area.

3. The City of Walker should continue using the **Brownfield Redevelopment Process and Renaissance Zone** opportunities to fuel private sector reinvestment in Sub-Area 3A. Turner Avenue is an excellent example of using the brownfield process to clean-up contaminated sites while promoting beneficial economic development and job creation. The former Lear Plant site has received a significant brownfield clean-up loan from the MDEQ and the City of Walker is now considering the establishment of a Renaissance Zone on this property.
4. The City of Walker should continue to be actively involved in the **GrandWalk study process**. The synergy created in such multi-jurisdictional, multi-disciplinary enterprises will most likely result in direct and indirect benefits to Sub-Area 3A.
5. As previously noted in this report, the City of Walker should consider the creation of a **new "hybrid" zoning district** for the "Four Corners" and "Alpine Ave. South of Hillside" areas. The traditional, suburban zoning currently in place in these areas will not allow redevelopment to occur as proposed in this master plan update.