

1 INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Project Challenge

Over the last five years the redevelopment of the Grand Center District has gained significant traction with the addition of new restaurants, residential options, schools, office tenants and a continued expansion of cultural activities and events. It also has a bustling evening scene during events at its many visual and performing arts venues. Unfortunately, few patrons arrive early or linger after to frequent Grand Center's other establishments. "At the Intersection of Art and Life," Grand Center's supporters will not be satisfied until businesses and sidewalks are occupied throughout the day and night. Despite its many destinations and other institutions, Grand Center is lacking in basic community needs, services and pedestrian activity during the daytime hours. Additionally, over 15 acres of surface parking lots exist at the expense of development infill opportunities. The principles of East-West Gateway's Great Street Initiative provide the proper framework to reveal, enhance, and discover the potential of the Grand Center district. The combination of measureable progress, visible results and clearly articulated urban transformation will attract the developers and tenants needed to realize Grand Center's vision of a full-service, vibrant district.

"Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will not die."

Daniel Burnham

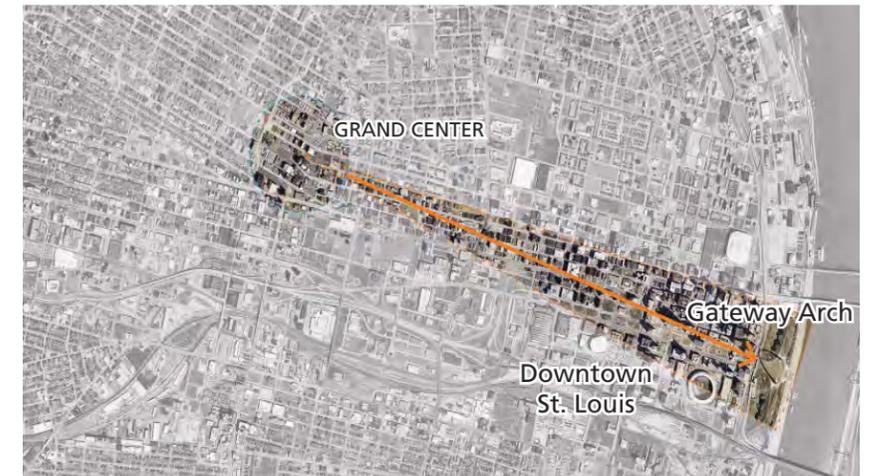
Study Context

Recognized nationally as a cultural hub, Grand Center has successfully established itself as a cultural arts destination with its blend of theater, music, media, fine arts and educational institutions. The Grand Center project includes over 2.5 miles of streets and an approximately 60 acre study area. Grand Center is located in what is called the "Midtown" area of the City of St. Louis as it is midway between the western city border and downtown along the Interstate 64 highway corridor. The "spine" of the district, Grand Boulevard, is a major north-south arterial in St. Louis connecting four interstate highways and the busiest Metro bus line in the region.

The product from the Grand Center Great Streets project will be a plan for the community and business district. Grand Center is much more than a typical business district. Within just a four block area there are 5 performing arts venues and 12 museums and galleries with over 1,500 cultural events and 1.5 million visitors each year. It is also home to 10 schools, a regional Veterans Administration Hospital and shares a border with the Saint Louis University campus. However, the challenges that continue to face the community are both practical and visual. These include: disconnected destinations; "wastelands" of large fields of surface parking; aging hardscape; vehicular dominated streets; sparse retail/restaurant offerings and empty sidewalks. These challenges make Grand Center an ideal candidate for the Great Streets Initiative.

The Study Area

The study area includes a majority of the Grand Center District with Grand Boulevard at the heart. The approximate boundaries of the study are Olive Boulevard on the south, Cook Street on the north, Spring Street on the west and Theresa on the east.



Location map

Partnership

Each Great Streets project involves a partnership between East-West Gateway Council of Governments (EWG) and a local sponsor. The Grand Center project benefited from the involvement of an existing strong and visible sponsor organization, Grand Center, Inc. (GCI), a non-profit organization founded in 1981. Their mission is to support the arts, preserve the legacy of the historic Grand Center district and transform their community into a vibrant and attractive place to live, work, shop, play and learn. In 1987, GCI hired an executive director and began the development of a plan to revitalize Grand Center into an arts, entertainment and education district.

Over the last couple of decades, GCI has been instrumental in developing arts venues, such as the Fabulous Fox and Sheldon Concert Hall; promoting other real estate development; programming arts festivals; preserving historic structures and making physical improvements such as streetscapes and parking improvements.

The Framework Plan Context

In the Spring of 2011, GCI worked with a national planning consultant, Don Stastny of Portland, Oregon, to develop a "Framework Plan" for Grand Center. The goal of this plan was to examine the Grand Center District holistically and build a common vision for its evolution. The Framework Plan engaged Grand Center stakeholders in a way they had not been engaged in previous initiatives. A 30-member Planning Committee was appointed by Mayor Francis Slay and represented not only the visual and performance venues, but property owners, property managers, residents, educational institutions and the VA. Personal interviews with 41 stakeholders were completed. The plan focused on physical improvements for the community but also uncovered structural challenges within the GCI board. Other outcomes revealed perceptions that there is a lack of common vision, poor physical conditions, no sense of community and a lack of diversity within the community. This plan was funded by 17 neighborhood partners. The product of this effort was a Framework Plan, instead of a Master Plan, that organized existing uses, suggested connectivity and encouraged infill development that fulfilled the making of a community.

When completed at the end of 2011, the Framework Plan set forth to resolve the following planning issues:

- Honor the history of the place and the people
- Make a paradigm shift of Grand Center as a community, not a district
- Place the Grand Center community in the context of the St. Louis region
- Execute a success audit to document what has already been achieved
- Celebrate racial and cultural diversity
- Embrace a "quick wins" strategy to build momentum on quickly achievable initiatives

- Use the arts as a bridge for cultural diversity
- Identify achievable public realm improvements that can be the "glue" that will encourage a shift in attitude
- Embrace teaching and learning as fundamental to Grand Center's identity
- Set the stage for attracting development
- Build a feeling of a community "front porch" at each institution to encourage neighbor and visitor interaction
- Solve the parking dilemma with consolidated and coordinated mixed-use parking facilities
- Create incubators for new activities and uses

The Grand Center Framework Plan created a framework or structure for many aspects of the Great Streets project. It outlined strategies to widen sidewalks, re-define transportation and create a new development/design pattern. It established an active stakeholder community that continued their participation in the Great Streets project. The Framework Plan also advanced Great Streets principles and created a common language about urban issues among participants. In light of its success and the momentum it created, it was critical for the Great Streets project to build on the Framework Plan by broadening the discussion to include technical considerations, intensive analysis and proposal testing.

Great Streets Initiative

The Great Streets Initiative is a program of East-West Gateway Council of Governments (EWG) which provides a forum for local governments of the bi-state St. Louis area to work together to solve problems that cross jurisdictional boundaries. The geographic region that East-West Gateway has served since 1965 is the 4,500 square miles encompassed by the City of St. Louis; Franklin, Jefferson, St. Charles, and St. Louis counties in Missouri; Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties in Illinois.

In early 2006, East-West Gateway launched the St. Louis Great Streets Initiative to expand the way communities think of their streets. Rather than viewing a roadway project as solely a way to move more cars and trucks faster, the goal of the St. Louis Great Streets Initiative is to trigger economic and social benefits by centering communities around interesting, lively and attractive streets that serve all modes of transportation.

In August 2012, Grand Center was one of three projects selected to participate in a second round of the Great Streets Initiative. The Christner + Hoerr Schaudt Team was selected for the Grand Center project. This team combined local knowledge and national planning/urban design expertise and included public art, lighting design, wayfinding/branding, civil, transportation, market research and community engagement consultation.

What are Great Streets?

Great Streets are representative of their places.

A Great Street reflects the neighborhood through which it passes and has a scale and design appropriate to the character of the abutting properties and land uses. Additionally, planning relies significantly on integrating technical expertise with local knowledge.

Great Streets allow people to walk comfortably and safely.

The pedestrian environment on, along and near the street is well-designed and well-furnished. The relationship between the street and its adjacent buildings is organic, conducive to walking, and inviting to people.

Great Streets contribute to the economic vitality of the city.

Great Streets facilitate the interaction of people and the promotion of commerce. They serve as destinations, not just transportation channels. They are good commercial addresses and provide location value to businesses that power the local economy.

Great Streets are functionally complete.

Great Streets support balanced mobility with appropriate provision for safe and convenient travel by all of the ground transportation modes: transit, walking, bicycling, personal motor vehicles and freight movement.

Great Streets provide mobility.

Great Streets strike an appropriate balance among the three elements of modern mobility: through travel, local circulation and access. The right balance varies with the function of the street and the character of its neighborhoods and abutting properties.

Great Streets facilitate place-making.

Great Streets incorporate within them places that are memorable and interesting. These may include plazas, pocket parks, attractive intersections and corners, or simply wide sidewalks fostering an active street life. The greatest pedestrian amenity is other pedestrians. Successful places encourage social interaction.

Great Streets are green.

Great Streets provide an attractive and refreshing environment by working with natural systems. They incorporate environmentally sensitive design standards and green development techniques, including generous provision of street trees and other plantings and application of modern storm water management practices.

source St. Louis Great Streets Initiative, East-West Gateway Council of Governments

Project Motivation & Approach

The project began with community engagement to help further define how the Framework Plan fit into the Great Streets process. The multidisciplinary team of planners, designers and engineers set out to define, test and refine concepts for Grand Center while vetting their ideas to the Grand Center Community throughout the process. The top priority was to create a safe, attractive and inviting public realm that accommodates convenient vehicular movement and contributes to the economic vitality of the community. If the pedestrian visitor experience can be transformed by vital, attractive infill development and complementary day and night time uses, more visitors are likely to visit, linger and invest in the community. As a result, business opportunities are created, centers of employment are increased and the area becomes a desirable place to live.

By embracing the Great Streets principles, Grand Center set out to achieve the following vision:

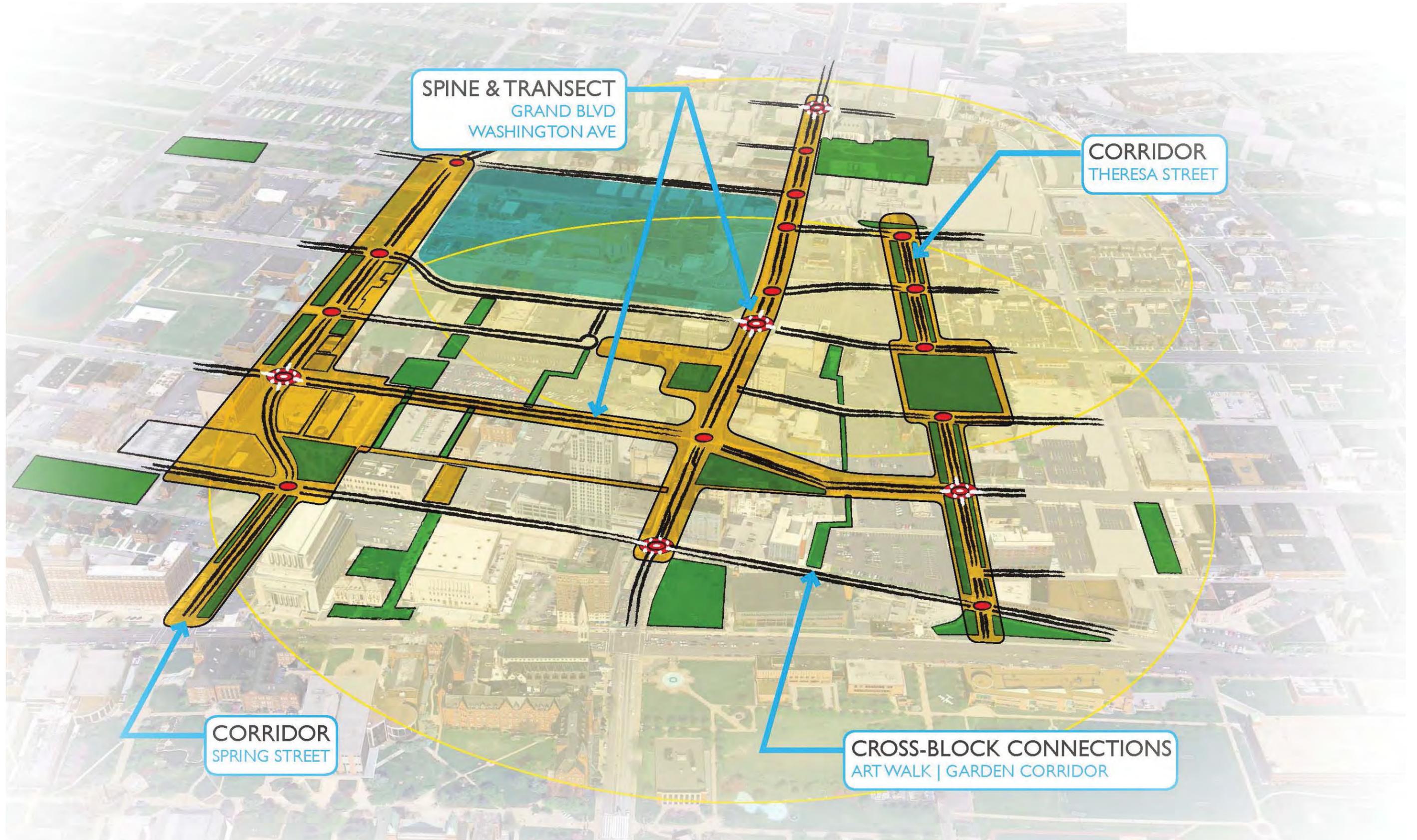
Grand Center's Great Street Project Vision Statement

Coordinate land use and connecting streets/pathways to allow the Grand Center community to maximize the potential economic value represented by 1.5 million arts patrons who visit the community each year. These visitors now come and leave with few arriving early and virtually none lingering after events. By creating a pedestrian embracing environment, the project will transform Grand Center into a vibrant entertainment, residential and retail community.

Project Approach

The Grand Center Great Streets plan should:

- Build on the momentum of The Framework Plan
- Be driven by stakeholders and the community
- Advance Great Streets/Complete Streets principles that have long-term value for the community
- Integrate design with capital and operational cost savings, environmental performance, and patron attraction
- Encourage vision-driven collaboration between the Council, stakeholders, and the design team members
- Be uniquely Grand Center with an attention and amplification of Grand Center's cultural context and timeless sense of place
- Reinforce connections to urban nature in a beautiful planted environment with crafted elements that are beautiful, functional, durable, and serve to attract and engage patrons for local businesses



Grand Center Framework Plan source: Don Stastny

