

# Executive summary

Protecting and enhancing the quality of life was a key theme heard from local residents, retailers, developers, landowners, and institutions.



## Approach:

Charleston is recognized as one of North America's most vibrant, livable cities. In recent years, the city has experienced an economic resurgence that has enhanced the prosperity of many downtown residents. Charleston's lower peninsula – the downtown – is now at a critical juncture. Success has also brought tensions and conflict, between residents, visitors, students and businesses. Creation of a Downtown Plan provides the opportunity to pause and reflect on future directions. The preservation of quality of life in the face of increasing pressures for growth is of paramount importance.

Charleston faces a challenging decision. On one hand, there is a strong sense by some citizens that there should be no further growth: there are already too many cars, too many people, too many visitors, too many students. On the other hand, many citizens believe that the quality of life could be improved by adding new jobs and by ensuring that housing is affordable for a wider range of incomes. Many people also believe that some parts of the lower peninsula could benefit from reinvestment. According to the former viewpoint, growth should be limited. According to the latter, there may be benefits from some growth. How can these viewpoints be reconciled?

In fact, this debate is not between preservation and growth. They can both occur. Charleston is now "on the map." Its uniqueness and quality of life ensure that it will continue to be in demand as a place to live, a place to work and a place to visit. Pressures for growth will continue. Growth is a positive attribute for any city that must continue to evolve in order to thrive economically, socially and culturally. The key issue becomes one of managing the change and directing the growth for the betterment of downtown residents and businesses.

Strategic growth management provides an opportunity to deflect growth pressure from where it causes the most friction to areas where it can bring the most benefits. The Downtown Plan provides guidance in that respect by identifying areas that can accommodate new development and those areas that should be protected. In some parts of downtown, particularly south of Calhoun Street, a smaller amount of development should be accommodated. North of Calhoun Street, there is room to accommodate a greater degree of growth that could be beneficial to all members of the downtown community.

The Downtown Plan recommends a balanced and coordinated strategy for the next twenty years. The key is to transcend the boundaries of individual issues and neighborhoods to deal with the downtown holistically. The

downtown's limited supply of available land is extremely precious – the citizens of Charleston must work together to ensure a positive future for the downtown and to preserve its quality of life. The premise underpinning the Downtown Plan is that appropriately directed, new growth can enhance the social, economic and community amenities for existing and future residents.

## Principles:

The Downtown Plan is based upon nine principles:

- nurture inclusive, vibrant neighborhoods,
- pursue economic diversity,
- foster sustainability,
- reinforce the existing urban structure,
- respect the grain, scale and mix of the peninsula's urban fabric,
- ensure architectural integrity,
- encourage a balanced network for movement,
- use growth strategically,
- maintain downtown as the regional center of culture and commerce.



### Charleston's urban fabric

The densest city fabric is found in the downtown's central area along the King and Meeting Street spine and in many of the neighborhoods. There is now an opportunity to reclaim the water's edge, much of which is occupied by waning industrial port uses, surface parking and less dense city fabric.

### Accommodating Growth

Continued economic prosperity is essential to downtown's quality of life. As the metropolitan area continues to grow outside of the downtown area, the risk is that new development will be enticed to suburban locations to downtown's detriment. Prosperity is best maintained by ensuring that downtown remains the cultural, commercial, and residential heart of the region. Retaining this role requires that downtown continue to accommodate a full range of uses: housing, office, retail, cultural facilities, and accommodations. Where should this growth be accommodated?

Downtown has areas that can be characterized as stable, in transition, and redevelopable. These stable areas are mostly comprised of residential neighborhoods, places that should remain largely as they are in form and use. Little growth or change in use or form is anticipated or proposed in these areas.

The *transitional areas* are places where the city fabric still exists but has been eroded by surface parking lots and demolition. New development needs to be inserted onto the available parcels to reinforce their existing character. The transitional areas generally include the traditional retail and residential corridors in downtown: Upper King and Meeting Streets; Spring and Cannon Streets; Calhoun

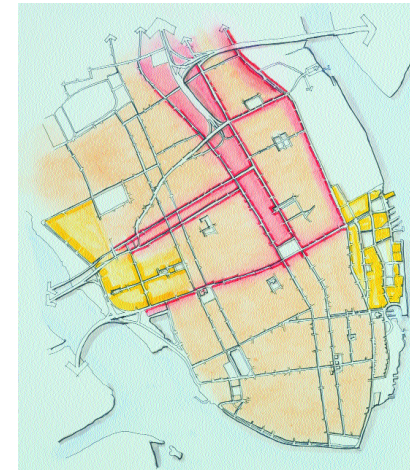
Street; Morrison Drive; and, the area occupied by the existing Cooper River Bridge.

The *redevelopment areas* are characterized by large tracts of vacant or underutilized land available for virtually total redevelopment. A network of streets and blocks and an appropriate built form needs to be established. Two major redevelopment areas exist: Cooper River waterfront including East Bay Street, and portions of the Ashley River waterfront including the area immediately north of the Crosstown along the Ashley River, and the medical complex.

With the exception of Union Pier, *transitional areas* and *redevelopment areas* are generally found north of Calhoun Street and are anticipated to absorb the majority of downtown growth.

### Achieving Balance:

Charleston has completed an extraordinary body of work addressing specific issues that impact quality of life: tourism, students, cars and parking, housing, and visitor accommodation. An opportunity exists to work across the boundaries of previous studies, to address shared issues and develop common solutions.



### Directing growth

There are ways to accommodate growth that will protect established neighborhoods while strengthening the lower peninsula's structure.

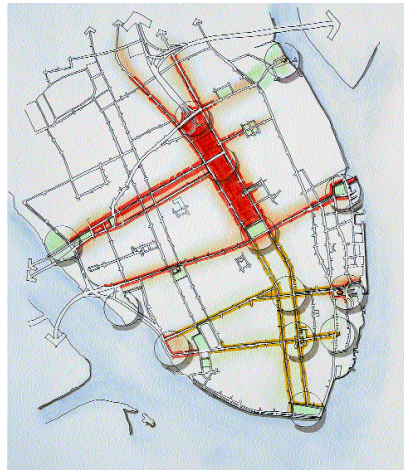
- Stable area
- Transition area
- Redevelopment area

As new housing, office, retail, and hotels are developed, five strategies should be pursued to ensure that *balance is maintained* and that *growth contributes to downtown* in a way that will improve the quality of life:

- improve neighborhood and community amenities,
- increase the affordability of housing in downtown,
- develop mechanisms to share growth's impact,
- reduce the reliance on cars.
- mitigate the financial impacts of growth.




### Urban Structure:

Growth needs to be further directed to strengthen Charleston's urban structure. Historically, growth occurred along the Cooper River waterfront, followed by King and Meeting Streets – the principal north-south parallel spines on higher ground. Wetlands were filled in to create wharves and other port-related activities. King and Meeting Streets were reinforced by the rail line and by a set of perpendicular spines: Spring and Broad Streets, and Calhoun and Market Streets. Relative inactivity in the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries left the historic city largely intact.



### Existing and proposed nodes and corridors

The lower peninsula's urban structure will be preserved and enhanced.

-  Stable corridors and nodes.
-  Corridors/ nodes for intensification.
-  Node

The majority of downtown possesses characteristics that are universally sought after – a mix of uses, intimacy, pedestrian quality and a sense of place. Each of these qualities serve as a model of urbanism.

However, in the post WW II era, Charleston has experienced the same forces impacting many American cities: mainly competing suburban communities, and the popularity of the car and the necessity to accommodate it. In areas where the city fabric is less consistent, its integrity is challenged by building forms that are more suburban in form and therefore do not fit well within the urban context.

There are four strategies for molding new development to reinforce this desirable city structure:

- reinforce the key intersections and corridors
- create new activity areas on both riverfronts
- support the existing neighborhoods
- enhance the public realm.

### Land Use:

The land use strategy is intended to be highly transit-supportive by placing greater amounts of employment (work-

ers), tourism (visitors) and housing (residents) within proximity to existing and potential transit corridors. The future land use recommendations also reinforces the urban structure.

Little change is anticipated in the predominantly residential areas occupying the majority of downtown, designated low-intensity neighborhood. The corridors (*transitional areas*) and the *redevelopment areas* are designated medium- and high-intensity mixed-use and are expected to accommodate a broad range of land uses. Focal points indicate key locations where particular consideration to urban design or architectural elements is intended to create landmarks.






### Built Form:

The city's character can be reinforced by ensuring the integrity of each new building. Buildings that fit into the historic city fabric have a number of specific characteristics. While there are exceptions, structures are relatively small in scale. Heights are relatively low. Active uses such as living, retail or office space are located at grade level or just above. Buildings have minimal setbacks. Parking is generally incorporated on street or in small driveways. In short, the city is comprised of buildings that occupy much of the lot, frame the streets and parks, and remain at a relatively consistent, low height. The effect is an intimate, pedestrian scale and unique environment.



### Proposed land use

The distribution of uses largely does and will continue to relate directly to the lower peninsula's urban structure.

-  Stable industrial
-  Low intensity neighborhood
-  High-intensity, mixed-use
-  Medium-intensity, mixed-use
-  Major open space

A number of issues have arisen that significantly impact the design and feel of new development. Recommendations aim to extend the character of the historic city into new development:

- new development should express the fine grain and small-scale of the city,
- design and construction strategies should focus on preserving vitality at-grade where possible, while respecting FEMA flood plain regulations that generally prohibit active uses from being located at street level,
- on-site parking requirements should be reduced to encourage active uses at grade,
- density restrictions on residential buildings should be reduced along transit corridors in order to allow for the type of density appropriate for downtown development,
- the excellent heritage preservation efforts in downtown should be extended to apply to the lands north of Line Street which will soon be under pressure to develop.

### Implementation:

The implementation strategy ensures that downtown's evolution embodies the Plan's principles and achieves its physical, economic and social objectives.



# A vision for the lower peninsula

- Transition areas 
- Redevelopment areas 
- Stable corridors 
- Stable neighborhoods 

The historic spine of the peninsula, the Upper King/ Meeting corridor will be strengthened with improved transit and infill development.

Cross peninsula trails will connect to Riverwalks.

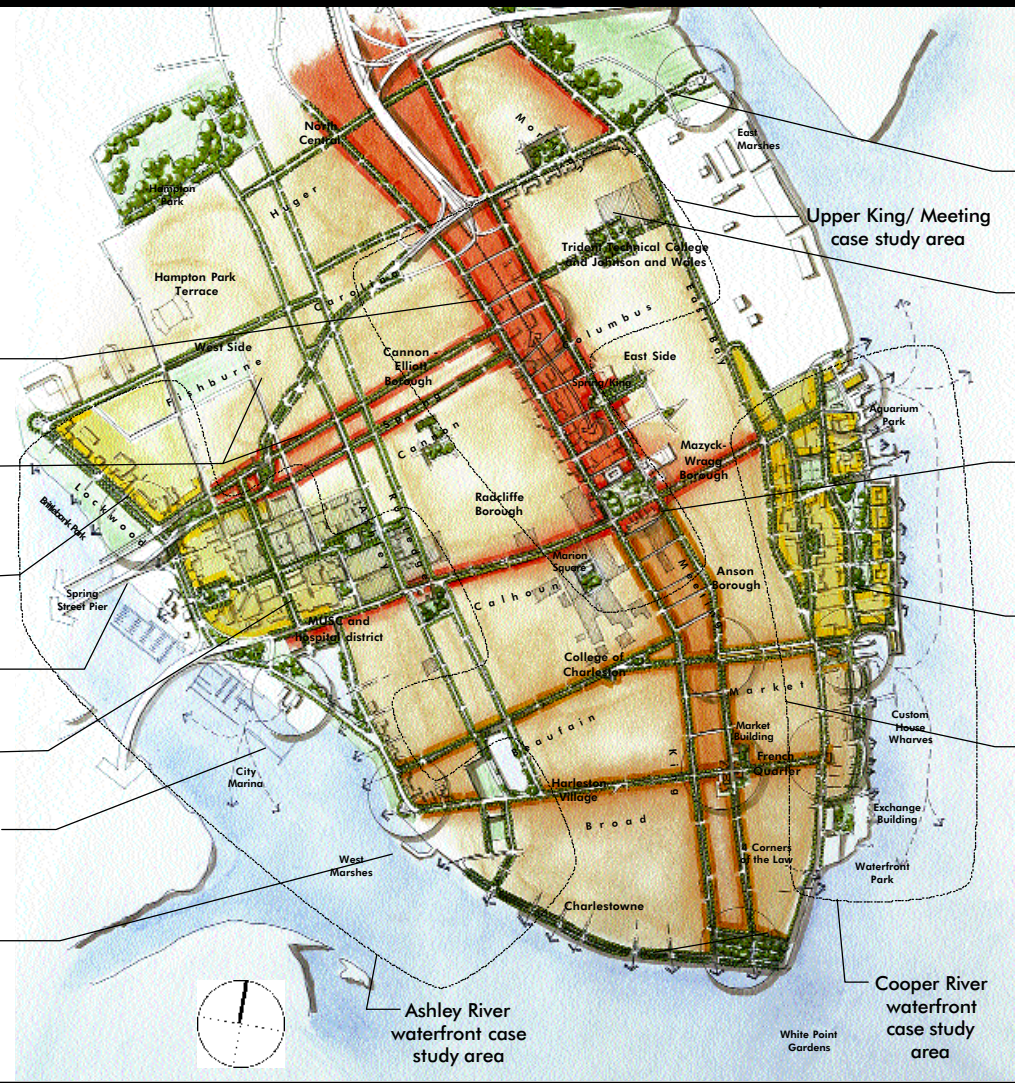
Upper Lockwood will contain new employment uses such as corporate headquarters and high tech research and development.

Brittlebank Park will be extended south.

MUSC plans to expand its facilities.

Public access to the Ashley River will be improved.

Lower Lockwood contains infill housing opportunities as well as the chance to considerably enhance the public space at the water's edge.



Upper King/ Meeting case study area

The Marshes could become an ecological park or fishing pier.

The removal of the Cooper River Bridge will create the opportunity to knit the East Side neighborhood together with new housing.

The Federal Building site, one of the most prominent on the peninsula, could accommodate a major new public use and housing.

Upper Concord neighborhood and Union Pier will mostly contain new housing and office employment opportunities with significant new open spaces.

Diverse, resident-oriented growth is encouraged on Market Street.

Corridors below Calhoun Street will remain stable.

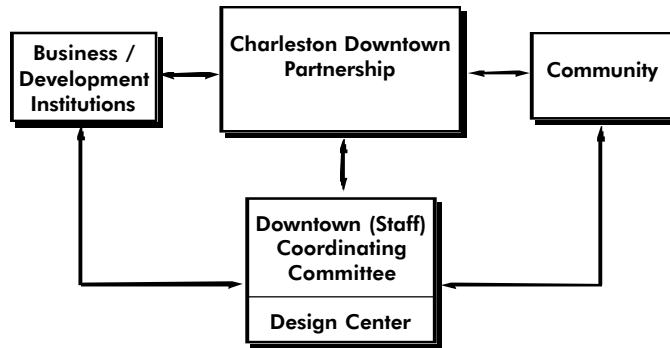
Growth will be directed away from the city's neighborhoods.

Ashley River waterfront case study area

Cooper River waterfront case study area



## Proposed organizational structure



The Charleston Downtown Partnership would include representatives from resident and business interests who would work with senior city staff and the newly created design center to implement key downtown initiatives.

The implementation strategy is grounded in Charleston's strong culture of collaboration and consensus building, bringing key sectors of the community together to work to downtown's benefit. The essential elements of the strategy are:

- consensus around the vision: by the community, including city government, residents, developers, landowners, retailers and institutions,
- an effective organizational structure: The Downtown Plan has stressed a comprehensive, collaborative approach to managing the lower peninsula's future. Three opportunities are proposed to link interests and issues together:
  - a Charleston Downtown Partnership to ensure collaboration between the city, the private sector and the community,
  - a Design Center, as currently being contemplated by the city, to assist the community in developing and implementing an urban design vision,
  - a Downtown (Staff) Co-ordinating Committee to formulate strategy, design initiatives and review proposals,
- a program of tasks including special area plans, design review of specific development proposals, review of capital spending priorities, and community outreach programs, preparation of a housing master plan, and, a cultural facilities master plan,
- pursuit of additional funding opportunities from other levels of government and private foundations,
- continued community outreach through education, participation in downtown partnership and working committees.

These fundamental elements can be readily put into place, ensuring that the process of managing the peninsula's evolution for the betterment of its residents and business people begins today.