



# Walnut Hill Neighborhood **Plan**

September 2023



inCOMMON wishes to thank the Steering Team members for their time, vision, and commitment toward developing this plan.

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inCOMMON also wishes to thank Spark for their support in the development of this plan, and the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority (NIFA) and the Omaha Community Foundation for funding to support this endeavor.



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The Walnut Hill neighborhood plan is a result of two years of public engagement involving surveys, workshops, public meetings, and an equity analysis. Our work was launched in 2021, with the formation of a steering committee who met monthly to help guide the process and ensure the neighborhood values were well represented. We employed our partners at Spark to assist with translating the community members' visions for their neighborhood into actionable and achievable plans. This document identifies the goals, vision, big projects, and quick wins that will guide future development organized around four key themes.

## Steering Committee Goals

- Create a shared vision for the future of our neighborhood
- Build a roadmap of that vision to inform the city and future developers
- Create action plans that will move us toward the vision together

## Walnut Hill Neighborhood Vision

Walnut Hill is a historic neighborhood in the heart of Omaha that treasures its diversity, affordable homes, and green spaces. We take pride in our community and work together to ensure it is beautiful, safe, and welcoming to all.



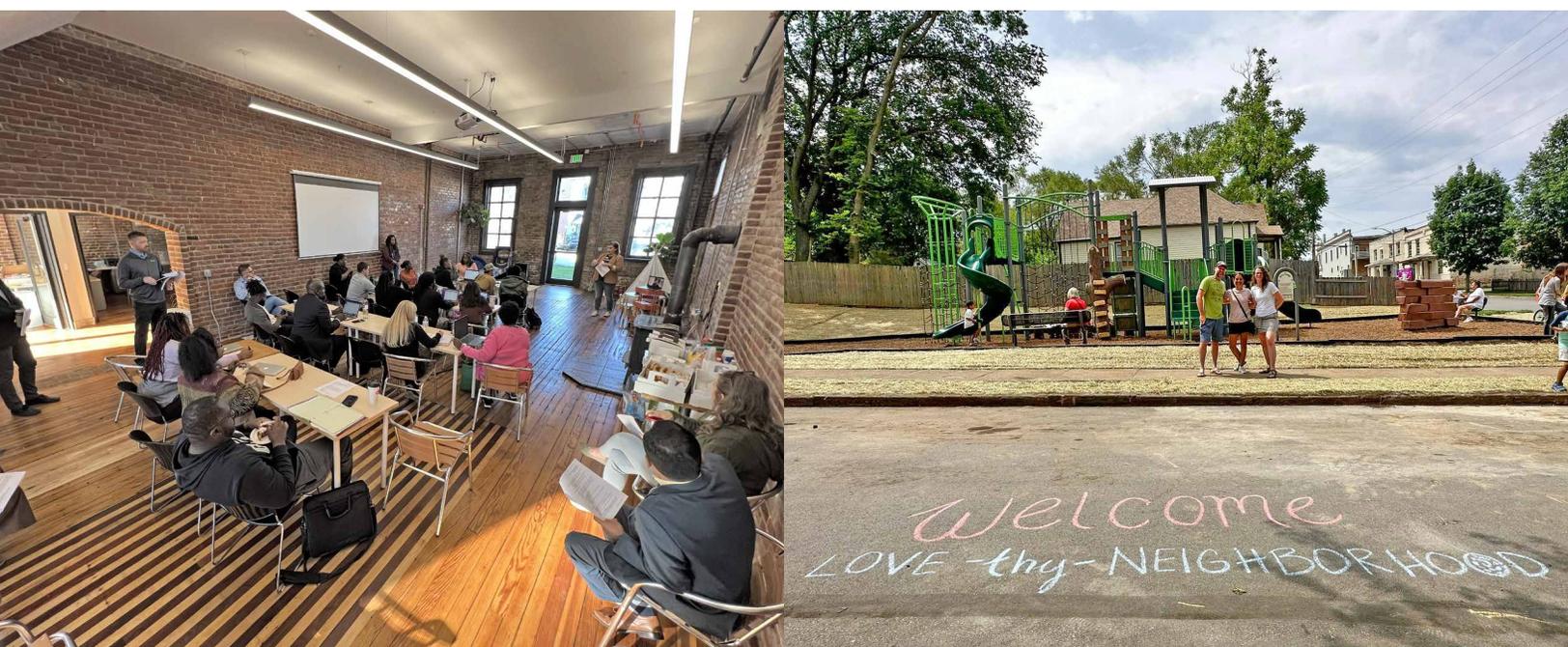
Through the community engagement process the following quick win actions were prioritized by neighbors as the efforts they want to see move forward first. These are low-cost, high-impact, and time-friendly projects that can help the neighbors see their vision underway within the next 24 months.

1. Free Common Sports Area
2. Artistic Reservoir Lighting
3. Park Party
4. Traffic Calming Research
5. Tenants Rights Team
6. Community Bike Rides
7. Wayfinding
8. Urban Orchard
9. Beltline Trail Visioning
10. Monthly Clean-ups
11. 40th Street Streetscape Planning
12. Service Learning at Walnut Hill
13. Oral History Collection



inCOMMON used early feedback to initiate some projects that are either currently under construction or are already completed.

- Walnut Hill Commons - a community center located in the heart of Walnut Hill at 1330 North 40th Avenue, the Commons is home to inCOMMON offices and gathering space, three nonprofits and two newly renovated apartments. This project cost \$1.2 million and was primarily funded by private donations through Mustaches 4 Kids Omaha and public funds through the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, and completed in early 2022.
- Playground - another early identified neighborhood need, the new playground, located in Walnut Hill Park, at 40th & Seward Streets, was funded by Lockwood Development and Scoular. The play area is privately maintained but open to the general public, and was completed in June 2023.



## Geography

Walnut Hill is an historic North Omaha neighborhood bounded on the north by Decatur Street, on the south by Nicholas Street, and on the west by Northwest Radial and the east by N 36th Street. The heart of Walnut Hill is Hamilton Street, which is home to several small businesses and Walnut Hill Elementary School. Other geographic highlights include the busy intersection of 40th and Hamilton - home to the Walnut Hill Commons, the 40th Street Theater and Hargiss Stringed Instruments - and Walnut Hill Park and the MUD Reservoir.



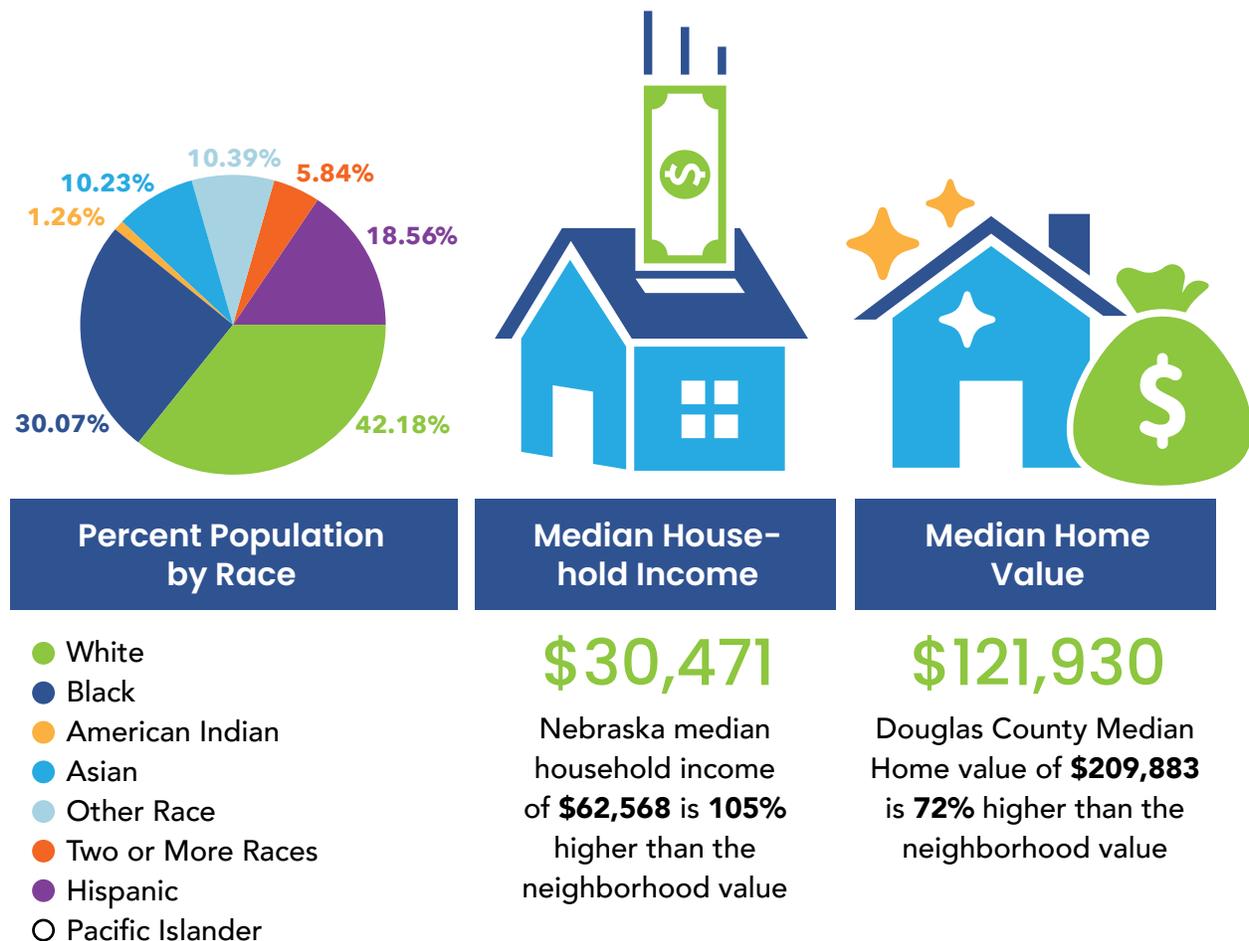
-  Walnut Hill Commons
-  Walnut Hill Park
-  Walnut Hill Elementary
-  City Sprouts

## Demographics

Walnut Hill contains a wide array of assets, but as with many disinvested neighborhoods, its estimated 3,700 residents also face significant challenges. According to the American Community Survey, today, more than one in four residents live in poverty and the median household income is 105% lower than Nebraska’s median income. This is despite the fact that a majority (85%) of the residents over the age of 16 are employed.

The neighborhood boasts one of the most diverse racial make-ups in the city of Omaha, with no single race comprising more than 50% of the population. 2020 US Census projections indicate an overall population growth from 2010 to 2020, and a significant increase in the Hispanic population.

Housing challenges in Walnut Hill are vast and include an older housing stock, with a majority of homes built before 1930. Median home values are 72% lower than the Douglas County average, and more than half of the neighborhood’s homes are renter occupied.



## History

In the late 1800s, the establishment of Walnut Hill, Orchard Hill, and Bemis Park, higher-class subdivisions northwest of downtown Omaha, led to the development of a commercial node near the intersection of North 40th and Hamilton Streets. In 1890, only one brick building existed on this corner, at the very beginning of the streetcar service. The block was dotted with small wood frame structures. By 1918, the area was significantly developed, with brick commercial buildings developed along this node, as well as rows of residential dwellings. In 1962, the development had continued, now with concrete buildings as well. Today, many of the structures of the previous centuries remain, in various states of use and repair.

The streetcar connecting Benson to Downtown also connected this intersection, which was a popular stop. Streetcar service to the neighborhood began in 1887 and ceased in 1948. At one point, five streetcar services competed for land and influence before eventually consolidating, and finally, ceasing operation.

The area was formerly serviced by the Belt Line railway, a commuter train connecting North Omaha. The service began around 1883, and by the turn of the century, had become an industrial line as streetcars, and subsequently automobiles, took over. The area was also connected to Benson as it was founded, using the Benson Motor Railway.

Walnut Hill, Orchard Hill, and other affluent neighborhoods nearby to the intersection made 40th & Hamilton a hub for commerce and transportation. The area included a number of stores satisfying the area's daily needs, further separating it from Downtown Omaha as traveling there was made less necessary. These included Hamilton Theatre, Dixie Cream DoNut store, Martin Bakeries, as well as taverns, liquor stores, grocers, jewelers, locksmiths and even architects.

Walnut Hill Reservoir, which began as municipal water works on the SE corner of 40th & Hamilton, quickly became a beloved outdoor space. The City of Omaha spent \$10,000 in 1880 on landscaping and design of the space, which is more than \$250,000 today. The area was a staple of the city for water and public space, so much so that when it burned down in 1915, it was fixed within a year.



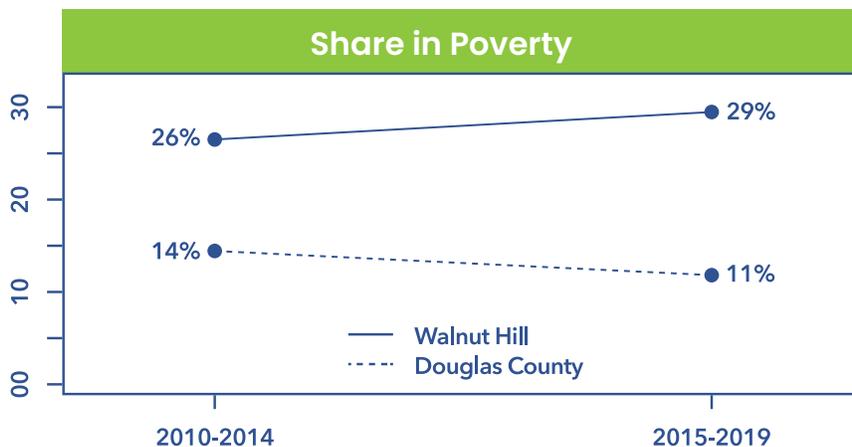
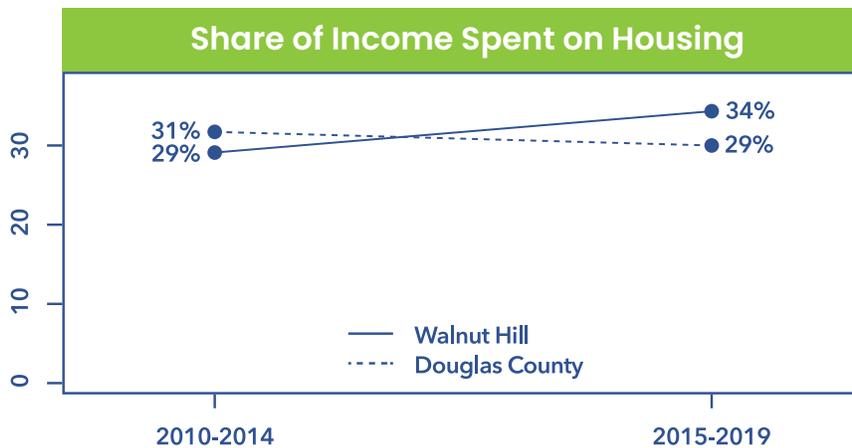
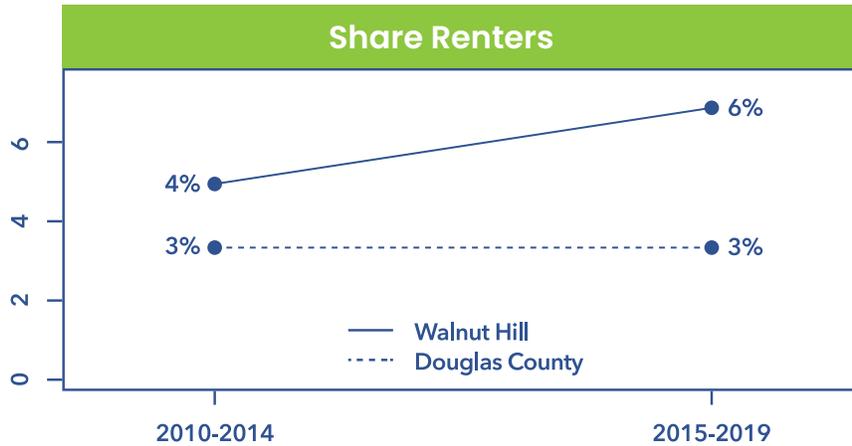
## Equity Analysis

In partnership with the Kansas State University Department of Civil Engineering and the Technical Assistance to Brownfields (KSU TAB) Program, Walnut Hill recently underwent an Equity Analysis to research equity-related indicators and better understand the existing conditions in Walnut Hill and to explore the existing factors that may contribute to racial and social inequities.

The analysis explores the demographics of the community to assess what challenges and opportunities it will face as it undergoes economic reinvestment and development. Findings from this report include the following information regarding Walnut Hill residents (all data points are relative to Douglas County as a whole):

- 2x more likely to be non-white
- 2x more likely to rent their homes
- 2.5x times more likely to be low income
- 3x times as likely to lack a high school diploma
- 4.5x more likely to be linguistically isolated
- 4.5x more likely to be unemployed

Additionally, a strong rise in renters (with those renters now housing burdened, on average) and a slight rise in people living in poverty culminate together as an economic indicator of concern that should be kept in mind when considering the future of Walnut Hill.



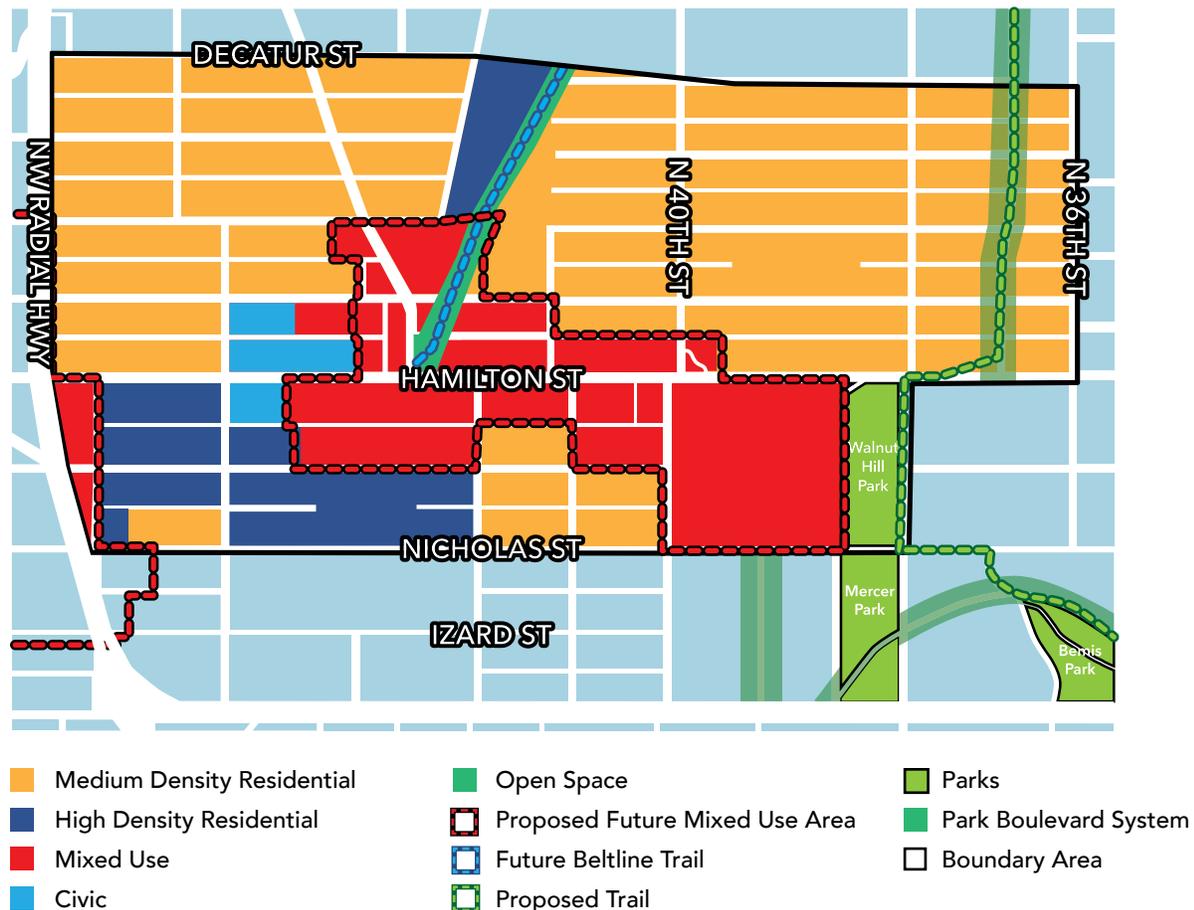
Full Report: <https://incommoncd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/WalnutHillEquity2022.pdf>

## Current Conditions & Land Use

Most of the Walnut Hill neighborhood is zoned for residential development. Previous city zoning requirements allowed for lower density (R4) single-family development in areas south of Hamilton Street and higher density development (R5) north of Hamilton Street. Engagement with the community members brought forth a desire to increase the density allowed throughout the neighborhood.

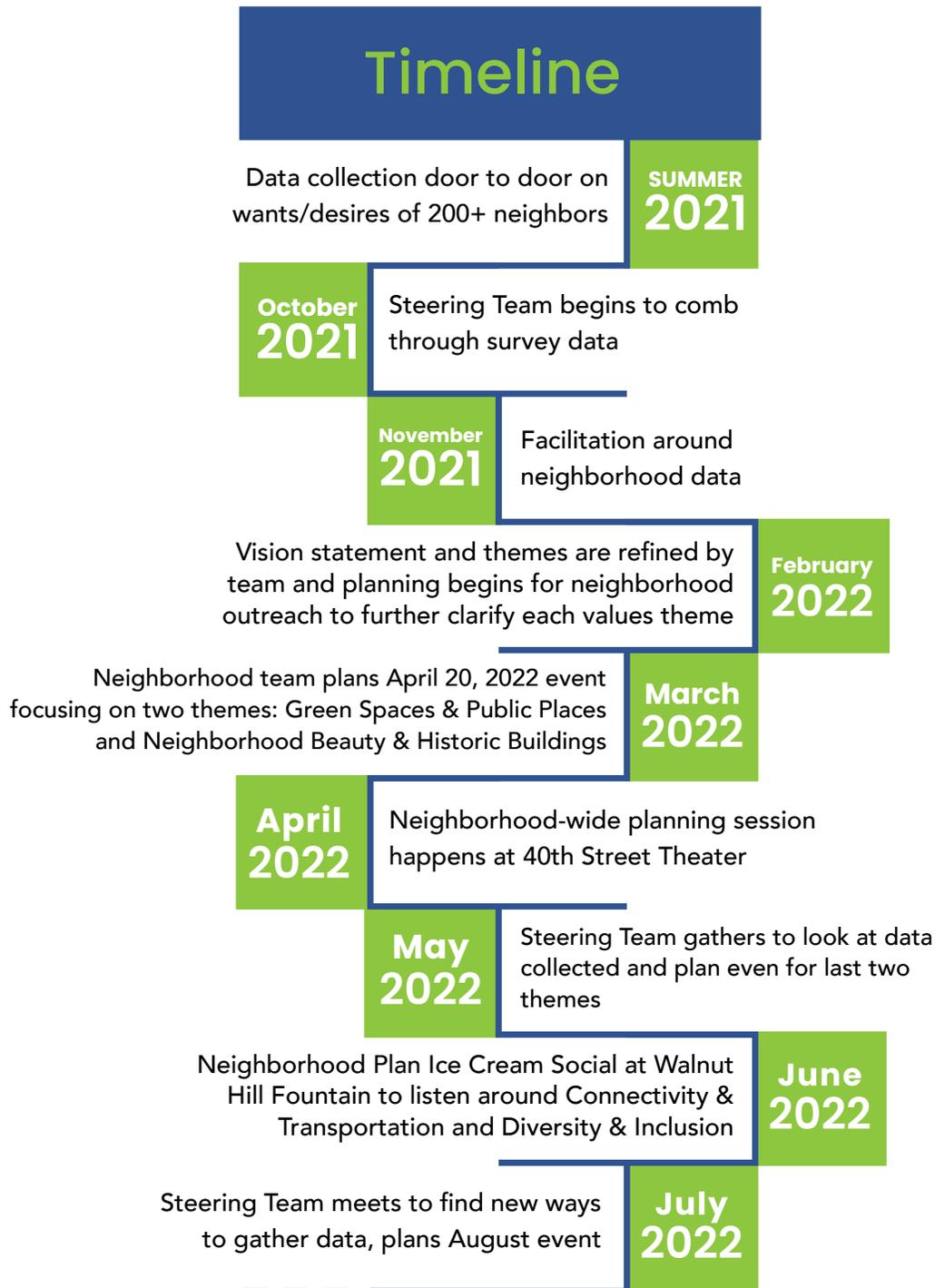
The revised future land use map below illustrates a larger geographic area that allows for R5 or Medium Density real estate development without a special use permit. This designation allows for a wide variety of housing types, including single family detached and attached units, duplexes and townhomes. The map also includes new Mixed Use areas around the commercial core of the neighborhood, along 40th and Hamilton Streets, including the Reservoir site that may be redeveloped now that it has been surplus and decommissioned by MUD. The map also highlights two public trails, the planned Belt Line trail and the potential John A Creighton Boulevard trail.

## Proposed Future Land Use





inCOMMON utilized the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model approach to engaging Walnut Hill neighbors and businesses in the development of this plan. ABCD is a methodology for the sustainable development of communities based on their strengths and potentials. Below is a general timeline of the process utilized by inCOMMON in Walnut Hill.







The Steering Committee's first task was to utilize survey data to create a vision statement that would guide all the efforts contained within the neighborhood plan. Through the collection of more than one hundred surveys and impressions from neighbors, the Steering Committee put forth this vision:

*Walnut Hill is a historic neighborhood in the heart of Omaha that treasures its diversity, affordable homes, and green spaces. We take pride in our community and work together to ensure it is beautiful, safe, and welcoming to all.*



Utilizing the vision statement, the Steering Committee then put forth four themes to help organize the engagement process and provide focus for the vision. Each theme is guided by a commitment or goal for future development projects and activities.



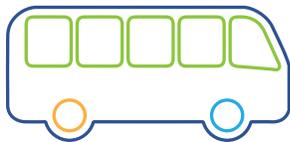
## Green Space & Public Places

Enhance the safety and vibrancy in the neighborhood's common spaces - the park, the gardens, empty lots, alleyways, trails, etc.,



## Neighborhood Beauty & Historic Buildings

Preserve the character of Walnut Hill by revitalizing and renovating buildings and designing new structures to be in line with the old ones



## Connectivity & Transportation

Increase opportunities for multi-modal transit and create traffic calming initiatives to increase safety for pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists



## History & Culture

Maintain and build social interactions that celebrate the neighborhood's past and welcome the diversity of all current residents

Feedback from the neighborhood surveys was categorized according to these themes and additional prioritization of both “Quick Win” (smaller effort, smaller budget, smaller impact) and “Big Project” (larger effort, larger budget, bigger impact) ideas was collected through online surveys and in-person engagement. What follows is the community’s vision for each theme, and a guideline for implementing their ideas.



## Green Space & Public Places



### Shared goal

Enhance the safety and vibrancy in the common spaces in the neighborhood - the park, the gardens, empty lots, alleyways, trails, etc.,

### Desired outcomes

- Family and pet friendly spaces
- Safe, clean, and beautiful common areas
- Thriving natural spaces that are easily maintained by community-members
- Areas dedicated and available to activities for youth and families
- Easily accessible community spaces with ample seating and shade



### Quick Wins

Idea	Key Partners	City Involvement	Initial Resources Needed	Possible Challenges
Public sports space	inCOMMON, Parks Department	Yes	Funding	Location
Traffic Calming Research on 40th and Hamilton Streets	Bike/Walk NE, Public Works (1,2)	Yes	Data collection from public work	Safety concerns, disgruntled drivers
New sidewalks and streetscape on Hamilton	Public Works, Keep Omaha Beautiful (3,4)	Yes	Funding, trees and plants	Time and funding
Neighborhood Beltline Trail visioning & design sessions	NRD, RDG, MAPA, City	No	Community center, resident participation	Participation
Neighborhood block parties	inCOMMON, One Omaha	Yes	Permits for street closure, donations from neighbors, tables and chairs	Participation, weather



## Big Picture Ideas

Idea	Key Partners	City Involvement	Initial Resources Needed	Possible Challenges
Revamp Walnut Hill Park, adding more landscaping, seating, an outdoor amphitheater & splash pad	Parks Dept, MUD, surrounding neighborhoods, philanthropy	Yes	Community design, architectural plans, budget creation, fundraising support	Funding, approval of various projects (site owned by MUD and managed by City)
Add an Urban Food Forest	City Sprouts	No	Land	Maintenance
Add outdoor meditation/yoga space with a fountain or running water feature, secluded pathway, and vegetation	Parks Department	Depends	Community design, architectural plans, budget creation, fundraising support	Costs
Add a dog park	Parks Department	Yes	City permission	Liability, maintenance, safety
Pocket playgrounds and playspaces	inCOMMON, City (5)	Yes	City permission	Vacant lots, funding
Demolish MUD reservoir	MUD, City, Developers (6)	Yes	MUD approval	Ownership, costs



Dog Park



Urban Orchard



NEIGHBORHOOD BEAUTY & HISTORIC BUILDINGS



## Shared goal

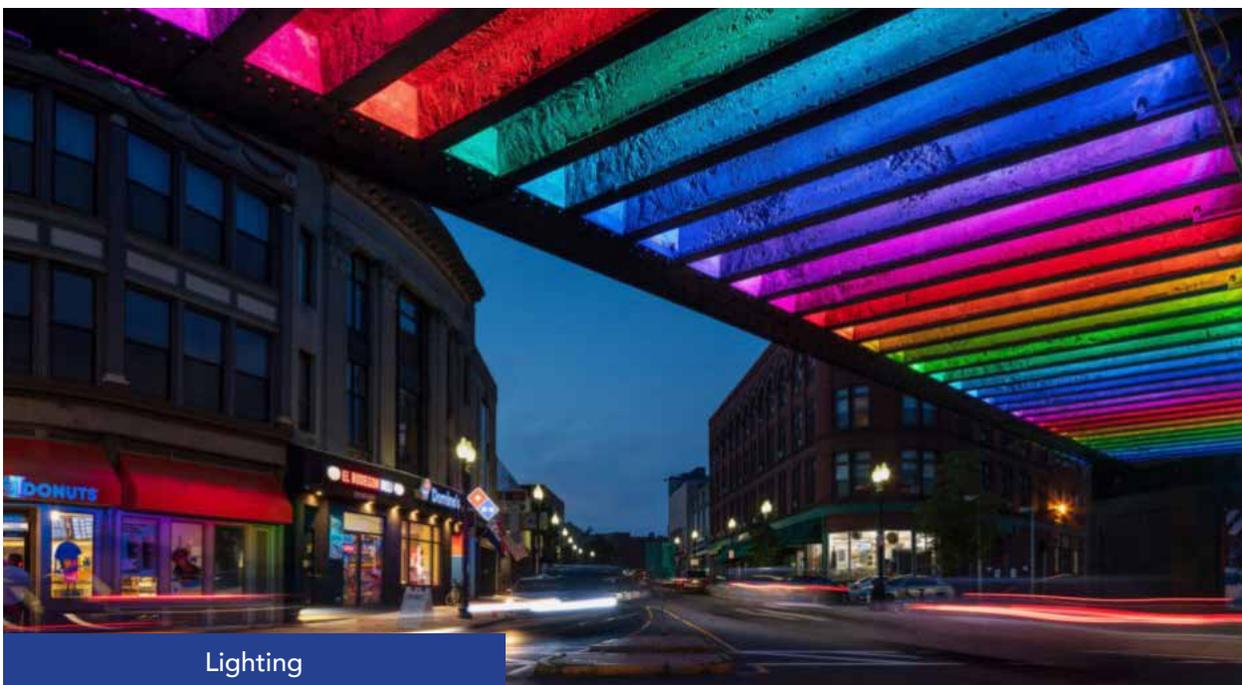
Preserve the character of Walnut Hill by revitalizing and renovating buildings and designing new structures to be in line with the old ones.

## Desired outcomes

- Affordable new housing developments with responsible landlords
- Preserved historic buildings
- New buildings that uphold the neighborhood's character

Quick Wins

Idea	Key Partners	City Involvement	Initial Resources Needed	Possible Challenges
Monthly neighborhood clean-ups	Neighbors, Keep Omaha Beautiful	Yes	Supplies, neighbors, volunteer groups	Time and commitment
More + better + artistic lighting in areas of concern	Artists, Public Works	Yes	Funding	Understanding of OPPD and city limitations and ongoing maintenance requirements
Landlords/Rental Properties & Tenants Rights	Heartland Family Service, Legal Aid NE	No	Meeting space	Anti-renter sentiment, time and commitment
Lighting and murals along fence for reservoir	Union for Contemporary Arts, Amplify Arts, Spark	Yes	Funding, ideas, and mural supplies	Permits and approvals, unknown future of Reservoir



Lighting

## Big Project Ideas

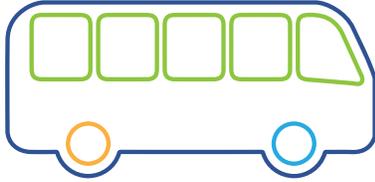
Idea	Key Partners	City Involvement	Initial Resources Needed	Possible Challenges
Mixed use developments along Hamilton Street	Property owners, Land Bank, developers	Yes	Predevelopment funds	Ownership, costs
Infill vacant lots	Property owners, Land Bank, developers	Yes	Acquisition funds	Ownership, costs
Restaurant on 40th and Hamilton	Local businesses, property owners	Yes	Investors, restaurateur	Acquisition, startup costs, licensing
Develop reservoir to serve neighborhood needs	MUD, City, Developers	Yes	MUD approval	Ownership, costs



Monthly neighborhood clean-ups



Landlords/Rental Properties & Tenants Rights



CONNECTIVITY & TRANSPORTATION



### Shared goal

Increase opportunities for multi-modal transit and create traffic calming initiatives to increase safety for pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists.

### Desired outcomes

- Safe crosswalks, sidewalks and paths for all pedestrians and bicyclists
- Wayfind that highlights proximity to other Omaha destinations
- Community walking/biking trail
- Bus stop kiosks with shelter



### Quick Wins

Idea	Key Partners	City Involvement	Initial Resources Needed	Possible Challenges
Bike Rides	B-Cycle	No	Bikes, media awareness	Trail route, safety
Creative Wayfinding	Graphic Designers	Depends	Funding, local artists and designers	City requirements for standard signage
Repaired sidewalks	Bike/Walk NE	Depends	Sidewalk assessment, bids from contractors	Funding

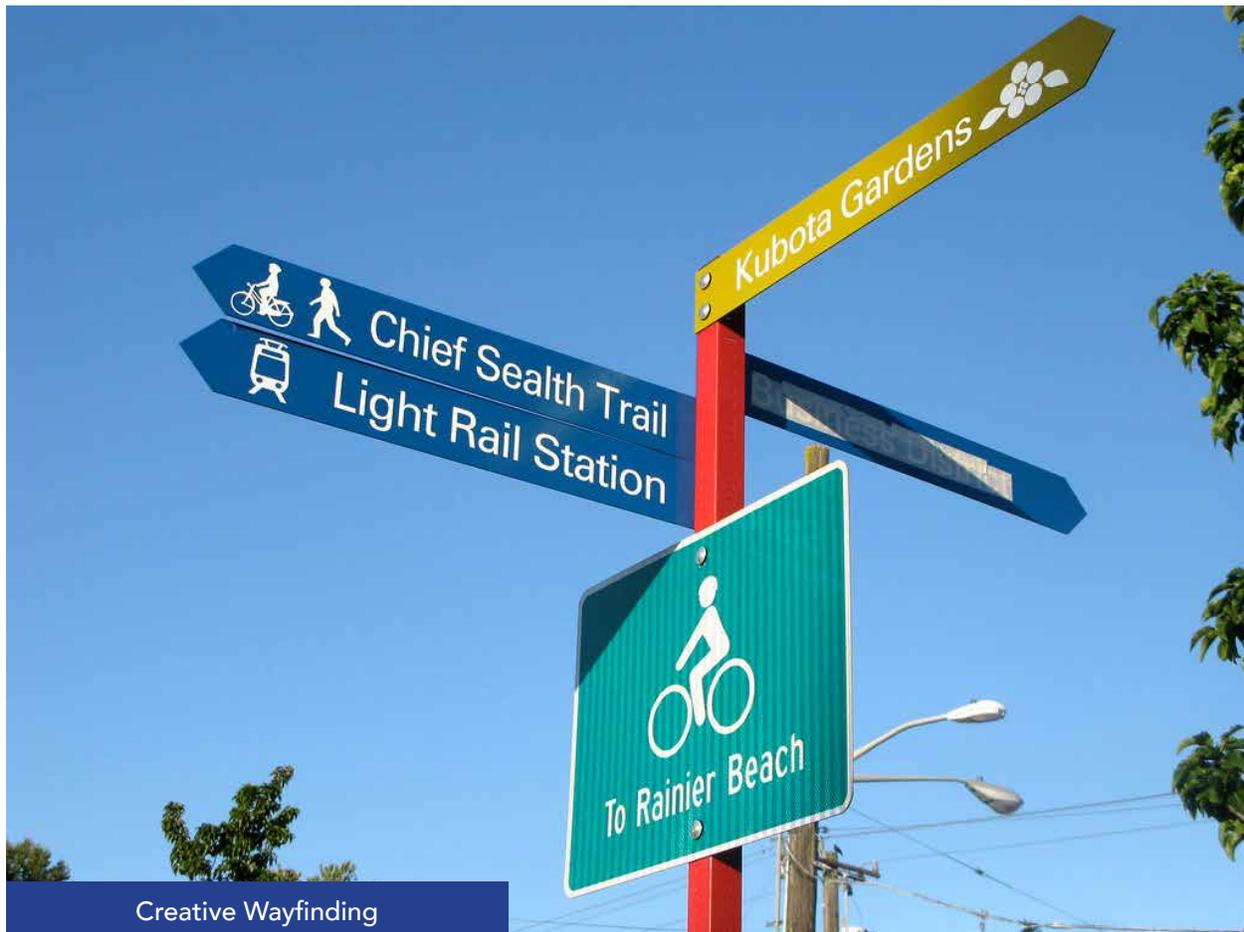


Traffic Calming Pilot



### Big Project Ideas

Idea	Key Partners	City Involvement	Initial Resources Needed	Possible Challenges
Beltline Trail	NRD, RDG	Yes	Design input from community	Land acquisition, cost of construction, maintenance
New intersection at 40th and Hamilton	Public Works	Yes	Traffic survey, land from the reservoir	Time, traffic



Creative Wayfinding



Repaired sidewalks



Bike Rides



HISTORY & CULTURE



### Shared goal

Maintain and build social interactions that celebrate the neighborhood's past and welcome the diversity of all current residents.

### Desired outcomes

- Valued diversity of neighborhood residents
- Honor for the neighborhood's "staying power" and long-time residents
- Affordable housing with a variety of types and options



### Quick Wins

Idea	Key Partners	City Involvement	Initial Resources Needed	Possible Challenges
Park Party	inCOMMON	Yes	Permits	Weather, participation
Murals	inCOMMON, art nonprofits	No	Building/Canvas	Selecting artist, funds
Walnut Hill Tik Tok	inCOMMON	No	Coordination	Maintenance

### Big Project Ideas

Idea	Key Partners	City Involvement	Initial Resources Needed	Possible Challenges
Community Investment Trust - investing education for all demographic groups	inCOMMON, Spark	Yes	Technical assistance - MercyCorp feasibility	Time, capacity, bank backer
Community Land Trust	inCOMMON, Spark	Yes	Technical assistance - Grounded Solutions Network	Property owner restrictions



Neighborhood Market / Park Party



Murals



Bemis Park  
Neighborhood  
Association



ONE OMAHA



Walnut Hill  
Neighborhood  
Association



## PRINCIPLES OF EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW

Equitable developments and investments, including public subsidies provided to developers and corporations, should result in concrete and measurable community benefits, as defined by their community, for local residents, including historically and systemically marginalized people.



**Equitable Community Engagement Practices** connect with and take leadership from community members who are most affected by the development project, and actively center the needs and vision of the communities who have been historically excluded from planning processes — especially people of color, immigrants, low-wealth people, renters, people with disabilities and those with other marginalized identities.



**Equitable Housing Practices** provide families of all income levels access to housing that costs no more than 30% of their household income. Current community members and those historically marginalized or excluded should play a central role in defining community housing needs, should be able to stay in their chosen communities, and should have access to affordable, quality housing options and tenant protections.



**Equitable Transportation Practices** integrate a variety of transportation options, including transit, into walkable, livable, and affordable land use decisions to enhance healthy living and reduce transportation costs, specifically within low-income communities and communities of color.



**Equitable Economic Development Practices** require evidence that policies and programs prioritize community wealth building, high-quality job opportunities, and local investment and ownership opportunities to prevent unwanted displacement of historically and systemically marginalized community residents and small businesses and build stronger local and neighborhood economies.



**Equitable Land Use Practices** require that the overall vision, plan, and implementation of a development project includes local communities' assets, aspirations, potential, and preferences. They aim to keep current residents in the area and develop projects that promote people's health, well-being, and prosperity.

Read full Scorecard here: <https://heartland2050.org/scorecard/>



1. Vision Zero: <https://www.omahavisionzero.com>
2. Traffic Calming Program: <https://publicworks.cityofomaha.org/residents2/traffic-engineering/traffic-information-center/traffic-calming-program>
3. Investigate creating a Sidewalk Improvement District (a mechanism through the City)
4. Consider partnering with MAPA on a Block Talk: <https://mapacog.org/projects/maple-street-block-talks/>
5. Investigate Play Streets: <https://ladotlivablestreets-cms.org/uploads/4c8f4bf413af4fb9a94e1a32e2e80bcd.pdf>
6. Investigate Omaha Urban Thinkscapes: <https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-education-health-and-human-sciences/news/2021/11/omaha-urban-thinkscape-project-launch.php>
7. Investigate Brownfields TAB: <https://www.ksutab.org>





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