

# Review of Greater Omaha's Urban Core Plan

*A strategic plan for the region's urban core to adapt, change and grow*  
<https://www.omahachamber.org/urban-core/>

Prepared by Wilson Freije for Rethink Coalition  
May 12, 2022

Omaha is taking on a series of urban redevelopment and improvement projects to revitalize the city, attract and retain a talented workforce, and improve the city's overall livability. This emphasis on improving the urban center is part of the city's vision to add 30,000 new workers. The Chamber has released the Urban Core Strategic Plan ("Plan") to accomplish this goal. The Plan seeks to attract talent to the city and drive economic growth by reclaiming land from urban highways, redeveloping and repurposing current spaces, and improving urban housing and transportation options. The Plan is multifaceted and seeks to build upon and expand redevelopment and growth projects already underway, including a Riverfront Revitalization project and the University of Nebraska Medical Center ("UNMC") NEXt project. The projects and the Plan include major freeway reconstruction and alteration, the creation of land caps stitching together the city grid, expansion of transit options for residents, and redevelopment of current city spaces.



*(Left) Model of the Saddle Creek cap. (Right) Representation of how the landscaped cap would connect to the University of Nebraska Medical Center*

The NEXt project is a public-private partnership to create a federal public-health disaster response space involving a \$2.6 billion investment in the UNMC campus in downtown Omaha. To complement the project, the Chamber proposes building a cap over Saddle Creek Road with a landscaped bridge to link administrative UNMC buildings on the west of Saddle Creek back to the main campus and create public green space.

In addition to the Saddle Creek Lid, the Greater Omaha Chamber proposes to build a cap over the North-South leg of I-480, a freeway that divides the city. The chosen portion of I-480 is recessed, allowing for the cap, which would reduce the barrier created by the highway, reconnecting downtown neighborhoods and facilitating pedestrian traffic.



*(Top) Model View of the proposed I-480 LID. (Bottom) Visual representation of what the new cap would look like after construction. The Cap would be located between Harney Street and Douglas Street, creating a space for public events.*

The Chamber also proposes the removal of two I-480 off-ramps. The removal of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Street ramp and the 30<sup>th</sup> street ramp will open up 3 and 6 blocks of unused land for development, respectively. Moreover, the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Street ramp is adjacent to space that once housed the Civic Auditorium, which was torn down in 2017. The Plan incorporates the redevelopment of the dormant plot into a mixed-use space housing residential, office, and neighborhood-serving retail use.

The Greater Omaha Chamber is rethinking the east/west portion of I-480. This portion of the highway creates a barrier between neighborhoods to the north and Creighton University to Downtown Omaha. The Plan proposes replacing it with either a multi-way boulevard or a one-way couplet to remove this barrier. While the couplet would maintain aspects of the freeway, both options would reclaim land formerly held by the highway.



*Proposed layout of the east/west portion of I-480, if the elevated highway was removed/converted.*

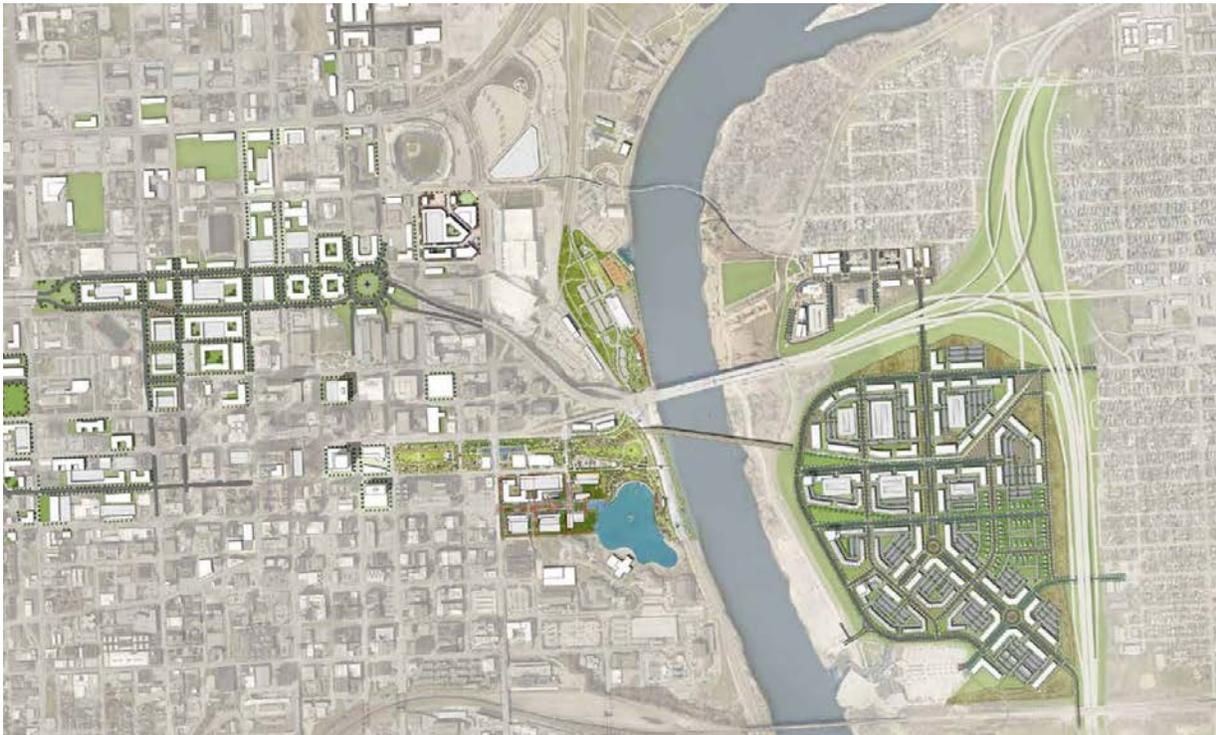
The Riverfront Revitalization project is a \$325 million effort to improve urban open/green spaces adjacent to the Missouri River. The project consists of three locations, The Gene Leahy Mall, the Heartland of America Park, and the Lewis and Clark Landing. All three are in progress and set to be completed in 2022 or 2023. The completion of the Riverfront project will create new trails and recreational spaces and promote community activity use. The redevelopment of the Gene Leahy Mall has also opened up a block of new, usable space. In addition, the W. Dale Clark Library, located just west of the Gene Leahy Mall, is set to be relocated six blocks to the south. As a result, there will be two blocks of developable space that the Plan seeks to capitalize on. The Plan aims to complement the \$433 million skyscraper Mutual of Omaha has planned for the site and that is slated for completion by 2026. Adjacent to the Heartland

of America Park, the Chamber intends to build a pedestrian/bike/transit bridge across the Missouri River. This will serve to connect the city to further housing options east of the river and complete a 2-mile loop of trails that would run on either side of the river. The bridge will also connect to Dodge Park, a city-owned golf course that the Chamber may convert into a mixed-use residential neighborhood. The completion of this walkable neighborhood with quick access to parks, downtown jobs, and other amenities is part of the Chamber's effort to attract and retain talent and be competitive at a national level.



*(Left) Visual depiction of the Dodge Park city-owned golf course facing downtown Omaha. (Right) Visual depiction of the proposed plan to convert the golf course into a walkable community connected to the city via the proposed transit bridge over the Missouri River.*

One of the Plan's significant priorities is improving transportation options and shifting the city away from an auto-centric design. The push for enhanced transportation options is part of Omaha's Urban Core's Total Mobility System (TMS). Omaha already has BRT routes and other bus routes to manage local transit. The Chamber proposes an initial Streetcar route for rapid and convenient transit east and west across the city's center to build on current transportation options. The Chamber also plans to extend BRT routes, incorporating Autonomous Shuttle Connectors to facilitate travel along riverfront neighborhoods and to invest in fixed-rail transit to connect the peripheral Omaha neighborhoods to the metro area. However, the Chamber still wants to ensure accessibility to the city by car and is looking to balance local transit, pedestrian, and bike needs with auto and parking needs.



*Image showcases some of the Omaha developments contained within the Greater Omaha Chamber Plan as well as the Riverfront Revitalization efforts. Seen in the image are all three parks (Gene Leahy Mall, the Heartland of America Park, and the Lewis and Clark Landing) undergoing redevelopment as a result of the Riverfront Revitalization, the proposed I-480 east/west retrofit, the proposed Missouri River Transit Bridge, the proposed Dodge Park community, as well as other investment/redevelopment opportunities in the city.*

In conclusion, the Greater Omaha Chamber has recognized urbanism trends in other cities and opportunities for urban redevelopment and investment in their city. The Chamber wants to ensure that Omaha is a competitive economic market and an attractive place to live. The Chamber has developed a bold vision that builds on current public projects and proposes new improvements to the city.