

01. Neighborhood Vision

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Overview

The industrial lands east of the downtown central business district have for years been an economic engine for the City of Billings, providing jobs and services, manufacturing durable and unique products, and shipping goods and recycled steel to coastal cities in the United States and abroad. The 1997 Downtown Billings Framework recommended revitalization of the district. In 2007, property owners in the district formed the Billings Industrial Revitalization District (BIRD, Inc.). With the support of property owners, Big Sky Economic Development Authority (BSEDA) and the City of Billings established the East Billings Urban Renewal District (EBURD), and a Tax Increment Finance District was created, with the goal of retaining vital businesses and industrial land uses and attracting reinvestment through



revitalization efforts. The EBURD was intended to proactively address economic stagnation issues as well as implement the Framework Plan, which identified the area as the “East Transition Zone” and a logical area for the expansion and continued revival of Downtown Billings.

The EBURD is guided by the 2006 East Billings Urban Renewal Plan (the Urban Renewal Plan), an overarching document that guides future development in the EBURD. Among other things, the plan laid the foundation for categorizing the area as “blight,” set the boundaries for a Tax Increment Finance (TIF) District, and called for the development of a more detailed development plan, design standards, and an implementation strategy. Since 2006, BSEDA has collaborated with the BIRD, Inc. and the City to secure a grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) to prepare this master plan for the EBURD. The purpose of this master plan report is to provide the detailed development plan and implementation strategy called for in the Urban Renewal Plan.

Study Area Location

The approximately 500-acre EBURD study area extends southwest to northeast from the edge of the Downtown Central Business District (CBD) along N 22nd Street to Yellowstone County’s MetraPark Arena and Exhibition Center Campus (MetraPark), and north-south from approximately North Park and N 6th Street to Montana Boulevard (Figure 1.1-1 Study Area). The study area is mostly located within the City, but also includes



key Yellowstone County (County) parcels between the EBURD and MetraPark seen as vital to the successful revitalization of the study area.

In other areas of this report, an “extended” study area is described that includes additional industrial uses and potential mixed-use properties adjacent to and primarily south of the study area within the City and the County. Strategies that are targeted for the extended study area are addressed in later chapters of this master plan.

Project Background

The study area is a historical industrial area defined by traditional auto-oriented industrial uses such as rail-oriented distribution facilities, building supplies, automobile service centers, and low-end housing. As of 2009, limited development activity is occurring just outside of the Downtown, at the west end of this study area. However, most of the recent commercial development outside of Downtown has been in the “West End” of the City near the new interchange, or in

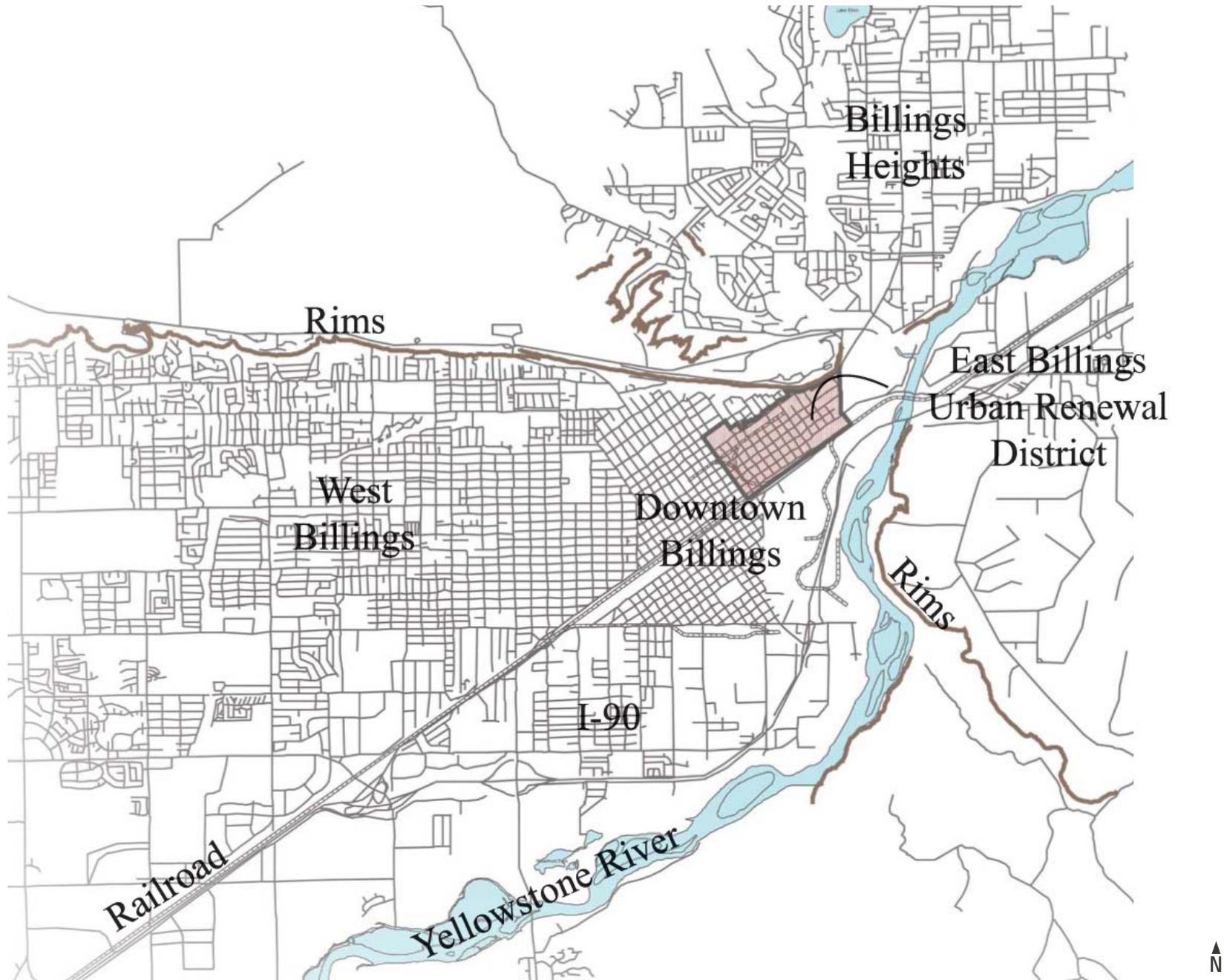


Figure 1.1-1 Study Area (From the CTA Urban Renewal Plan)



the Heights farther east of the study area. Even so, the study area has a number of strengths that can be seen as positive attributes, such as:

1. Optimal and central location to serve all of Billings and the surrounding communities; highly visible, well serviced by regional transportation including highways, interstate, major arterials, rail and bikeways.
2. It enjoys reasonably good infrastructure (with the notable exception of storm drainage).
3. It is near Downtown, the airport, and the established North Park Neighborhood.
4. It is in a strategic location, between Downtown and MetraPark.
5. It provides excellent access to the regional transportation network.

Concerned about the future of the study area, local business and property owners created the BIRD, Inc. and encouraged BSEDA and the City to create the urban renewal district.

Just as this master planning process was getting underway (mid 2008), First Interstate Bank (FIB) decided to locate its new operations center in the study area, redeveloping two blocks of highly blighted, older manufactured housing. The potential for new buildings for medical administration and federal offices appears similarly promising. Initial community meetings were well attended and engaging. Local optimism for the revitalization of the study area was fueled by the FIB investment, while at the same time a number of existing industrial land owners expressed concern over potential future displacement of their businesses and gentrification driven by a growing Downtown.

Because of the differing opportunities for growth within the study area, the decisions regarding the future of the EBURD will be framed within the context of the area's historic and physical context, as well as in applicable plans, policies, and regulations. This master plan report proposes a vision, guiding principles, a development framework, and implementation strategy consistent with the following key policy documents of the City of Billings and Yellowstone County:

- 2008 Yellowstone County – City of Billings Growth Policy Update (Yellowstone County and City of Billings)
- 1997 Framework - Downtown Billings (City of Billings)
- 2006 East Billings Urban Renewal Plan (BSEDA; City of Billings)
- 2008 North Park Neighborhood Plan (City of Billings)

The development concept proposed in the following chapters also considers the land, environment, and social conditions of the community.



1.2 PUBLIC AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

BSEDA and the EDAW Consultant Team (consultant team) established a Steering Committee and a strong community and stakeholder engagement process to guide the development of the master plan at the onset of the project in the fall of 2008. From the beginning, it was clear that the most vested stakeholders were property owners in the study area represented mostly by the BIRD, Inc., the BSEDA board and staff, and the City. The consultant team conducted one-on-one



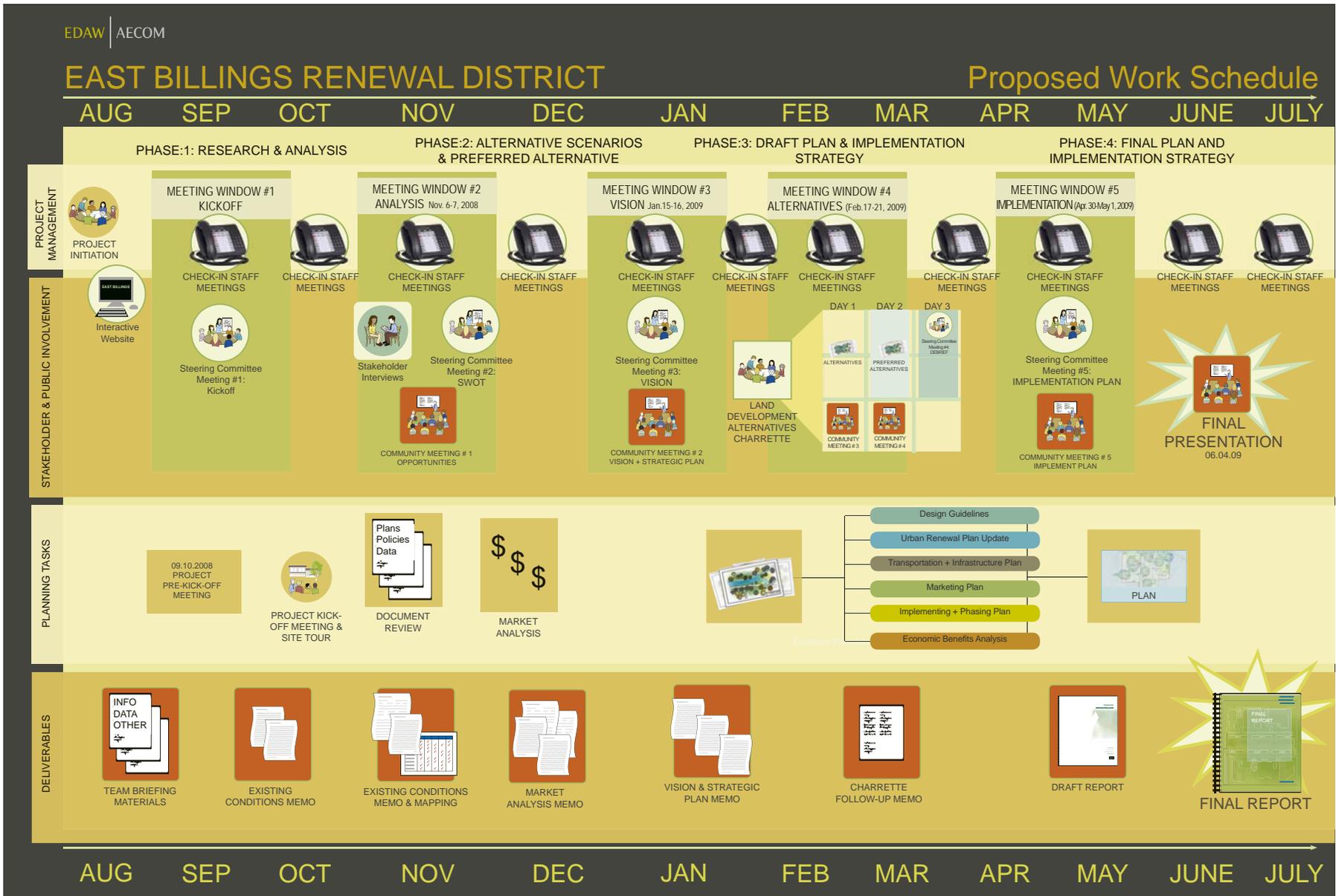


Figure 1.2-1 Public Process Diagram



Figure 1.2-2 Graphic Recording

or small group interviews with each of these groups, Yellowstone County elected officials and staff, and a variety of potential investors in the City. These individual discussions were augmented by widely publicized public meetings held in easily accessible and visible locations at MetraPark. Public meetings featured the following sequential elements: Project Kickoff, Vision, Alternatives for Development, Preferred Development Concept, Implementation Strategies, and a Final Presentation.

The public process diagram on the previous page (Figure 1.2-1) illustrates the master planning process, including public meetings, planning tasks, Steering Committee guidance, and planning products. Minutes for the various meetings and attendance lists, as well as the graphic recordings of public and Steering Committee meetings similar to that illustrated in Figure 1.2-2, are available from BSEDA upon request.

Through a series of community meetings in late 2008 and early 2009, a set of guiding principles was developed for the study area.

1.3 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following guiding principles are the foundation for everything that follows – from master plan concepts to street character descriptions; from development standards to development incentives. The guiding principles for the neighborhood include:

1. **Economic Growth:** Foster economic growth in the District & surrounding region.
2. **Centers:** Foster distinct mixed use, industrial, and hospitality centers with a strong sense of place and character.
3. **Affordable Housing:** Create affordable housing opportunities and choices for the Billings workforce, seniors, families, and students.
4. **Industrial Uses:** Ensure existing industrial uses can continue to operate as desired.
5. **Trees & Open Space:** Improve the natural beauty of the District by reintroducing trees and environmental features.
6. **River Connections:** Extend non-motorized connections from the Billings Core to MetraPark, the Yellowstone River, and the Heights.
7. **Edges:** Integrate the edges of the District with the North Park Neighborhood, the Downtown Core, the Medical Corridor, and the University.
8. **Transportation:** Provide a variety of transportation connections and choices throughout the District and surrounding areas.
9. **Infrastructure:** Complete the sewer and stormwater infrastructure and encourage methods for treating stormwater on site.
10. **Environmental Risks:** Understand and reduce historic environmental risks, while encouraging future high environmental quality in air, water, and soil; and



Figure 1.4-1 Artist's Rendering

- 11. Environmental Consciousness:** Encourage environmental consciousness, green development, clean technology, and healthy living.
- 12. Collaboration:** Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration.
- 13. Predictable Choice:** Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective.

1.4 NEIGHBORHOOD VISION

The following vision statement, debated and confirmed by the community through the aforementioned public process, captures a general vision for how the neighborhood will transform over the next 20 years:

“The East Billings Neighborhood is an economically and culturally vibrant neighborhood that provides opportunities for housing, clean technology, and pioneering ‘green’ industries along the City’s historic rail yards. Serving also as a gateway to the City and Yellowstone River, residents, businesses, and tourists alike can enjoy a variety of amenities within eclectic but pedestrian-friendly mixed-use centers.”

The City, BSEDA, and stakeholders seek a future for the 500 acres of industrial properties historically run by hard-working local residents that creates jobs for Billings residents, offers opportunities for close-in affordable urban living, establishes a gateway to central Billings from the Heights and Interstate 90 (I-90), celebrates Billings’ agricultural heritage, and acts as a model for its future as an intellectual center of green industry. In short, this neighborhood is at a crossroads. It can continue as is with limited growth and modest investments over time and be an adequate location for some and a lost opportunity for others. Or, neighborhood leadership can continue their efforts to position the study area as Billings’ top-tier opportunity for clean industry, urban revitalization, and eclectic renewal. This vision will require leadership, strategic investments, and the immediate seizing of catalytic opportunities. The area’s property owners, BSEDA, and the City of Billings are ready for this challenge and intend to form a management consortium, capitalize on tax increment opportunities, make important public improvements, and promote real estate decisions that deliver this vision as conceptually illustrated in this artist’s illustration (Figure 1.4-1) for the wellbeing of future generations.

