

CITY OF HASTINGS

Downtown Development Authority



STRATEGIC PLAN 2026-2031

Photos provided by
the MCSA Group



Adopted by City of Hastings DDA _____

Adopted by City Council _____

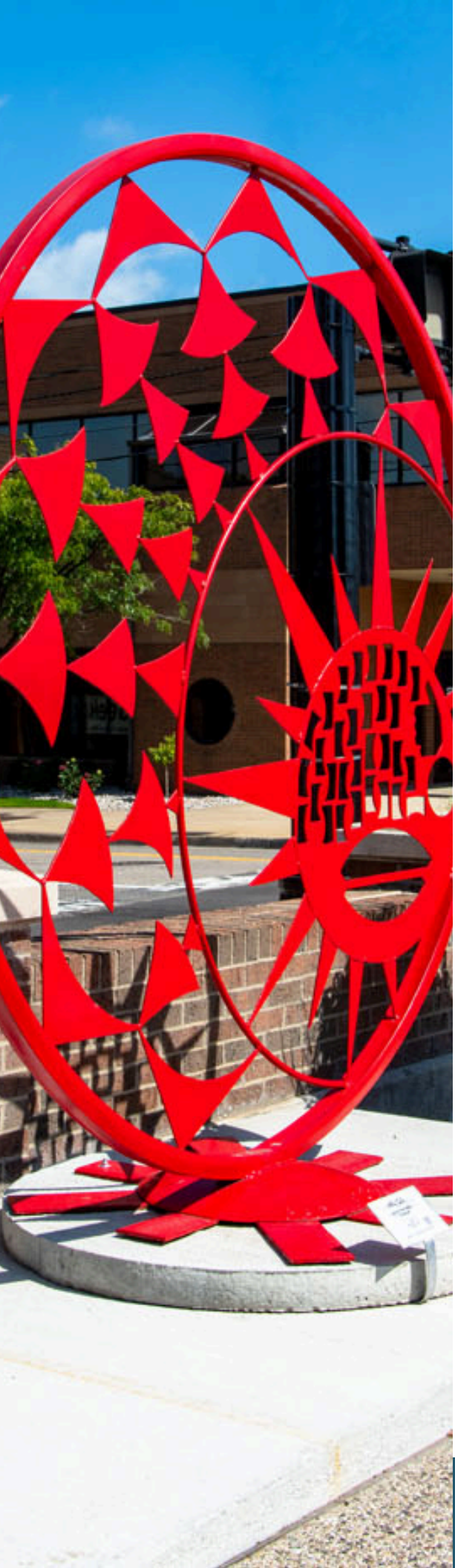


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VISION & MISSION



Vision

Downtown Hastings is a place where people of all ages want to be. A place easy to access that is enjoyable to explore and full of unique shopping and dining alternatives in an environment rich with art, music, and engaging public spaces.



Mission

The Hastings Downtown Development Authority enhances and promotes downtown Hastings through strategic infrastructure investment, business support and recruitment, effective use of financial resources, and collaboration with arts, entertainment, and community partners to foster a vibrant, accessible, and sustainable downtown.



INTRODUCTION

Downtown Hastings is more than a commercial district – it is the heart of our community. It is where neighbors gather, where local businesses thrive, and where the character and identity of Hastings are on full display. It is a place with real momentum, and a place worth investing in.

The Hastings Downtown Development Authority (DDA) was established to be a focused, resourceful champion for investment. Authorized under Michigan's Downtown Development Authority Act (Act 57 of Public Acts of 2018), the DDA is empowered to plan, fund, and implement improvements within the designated downtown development district. This authority includes the use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF), a tool that captures growth in assessed value within the district and reinvests it directly into downtown improvements. The DDA's Development and Financial Plan, adopted by the City Council and most recently amended in April 2023, provides the legal and financial foundation upon which this Strategic Plan is built.



This 2026–2031 Strategic Plan is the DDA's roadmap for the next five years. It is a focused, actionable document, not a wish list, but a commitment. It tells the community, our partners, and our board members what we are going to do, how we will measure success, and when results are expected.

The plan is grounded in three sources:

- The DDA's Board-approved Vision and Mission statements, which define our purpose and the downtown we are working toward
- Direct input from the Hastings community, gathered through three facilitated public workshops and a community survey conducted in late 2025 and early 2026
- Strategic goal areas identified by the DDA Board through a deliberate planning process

Six SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) organize the work ahead. Each goal includes clear tactics, defined metrics, and a time horizon, so progress can be tracked and shared openly with the community we serve.

We invite you to read this plan not just as a policy document, but as an expression of what downtown Hastings can be, and of the DDA's commitment to making it happen.

WHAT WE HEARD:

Community Foundation

Between late 2025 and early 2026, the DDA engaged the Hastings community through three facilitated workshops and a public survey. The engagement surfaced consistent themes that directly inform this plan.

What Is Working

- Thornapple Plaza, concerts, and year-round events draw strong community participation
- River Trail and Riverwalk improvements, lighting, and beautification have elevated the downtown's character
- Public art, murals, and placemaking investments are broadly celebrated
- New housing development and improved walkability demonstrate real momentum
- The community shows up – engagement and pride are genuine assets

What Needs Attention

- Downtown feels lively during events but otherwise quiet; consistent activity planning needed
- Business succession is a growing concern as longtime owners approach retirement
- Parking and access, especially in winter, remain functional barriers to everyday use
- Many residents cannot clearly describe what the DDA does or how it is funded
- Underutilized spaces, particularly large parking lots near the river, represent missed opportunity

Community Priorities

Participants ranked the following as their highest priorities for downtown's future:

- Vibrancy and year-round activation
- Business recruitment, retention, and support
- Walkability, connectivity, and safe access
- Preserving Hastings' authentic small-town identity
- Inclusive design for all ages and abilities
- Transparency and clear communication about the DDA's role

The Community's Message Is Clear

Hastings does not need to reinvent its downtown. The community wants the DDA to connect, communicate, and keep downtown vibrant year-round; building on a strong foundation rather than starting over.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK


This plan is organized around six Strategic Goals. Each SMART goal is supported by a defined set of tactics and a time horizon.


Strategic Goal


These are the specific, long-term outcomes the DDA aims to achieve over the planning period. They define what success looks like for downtown and provide a clear direction for measuring progress.


Focus Area


These are the key priority categories that guide where time, resources, and efforts will be concentrated. They organize the DDA's work and support the achievement of its strategic goals.


- 
Improve Downtown Access & Functionality

- 
Strengthen the Downtown Business Environment

- 
Elevate the Everyday Downtown Experience

- 
Invest in Purpose-Driven Placemaking

- 
Build DDA Clarity, Trust & Transparency

- 
Protect & Leverage Downtown's Identity

Parking, walkability, wayfinding, ease seasonal access with improved ADA and winter maintenance

Retention, recruitment, financial tools, succession

Programming, activation, amenities, family access

Infrastructure, design, maintenance, connectivity

Communications, education, engagement, governance

Heritage, authenticity, branding, character preservation

Goal 1: Improve Downtown Access & Functionality

Specific	Develop and implement a coordinated downtown parking and access strategy that addresses seasonal barriers, improves circulation, and expands wayfinding by December 2027.
Measurable	Completion of a formal parking study; adoption of a parking/access policy; review of existing entry point wayfinding signage; reduction in access-related complaints (parking concerns, traffic, pedestrian comfort, etc.) tracked through an annual community survey.
Achievable	The DDA will lead coordination with the City's Department of Public Works, leverage existing TIF resources, and engage property owners in shared parking solutions. A parking study is achievable within one budget cycle.
Relevant	Parking and access are the most consistently cited barriers to everyday downtown use. Solving functional access directly supports business vitality, senior accessibility, and visitor experience who are all core to the DDA's mission.
Time-bound	Parking study complete by Q2 2027-28 Budget; policy adopted by Q4 2027; expand unified wayfinding signage by Q2 2028.

KEY TACTICS	ASSIGNED	STATUS	DATE
Commission a comprehensive downtown parking and circulation study in partnership with the City			
Establish clear downtown business employee parking guidelines and communicate to downtown businesses			
Explore shared parking agreements with key property owners			
Expand upon wayfinding signage for a unified signage system connecting parking, the plaza, riverfront, and retail core			
Address winter plowing responsibilities through a formal agreement with the City's DPW or an RFP process			
Add benches, shade structures, and rest points to support walkability for all ages and abilities			
Evaluate and expand the social district boundaries to enhance outdoor gathering opportunities			
Install or upgrade a downtown digital kiosk(s) for event promotion and business visibility			

Goal 2: Strengthen the Downtown Business Environment

Specific	By December 2028, reduce storefront vacancy by 20% and strengthen business retention through targeted business recruitment, retention programming, and expanded financial assistance tools.
Measurable	Vacancy rate tracked biannually; number of businesses receiving DDA financial assistance; number of new businesses opened in the district; business satisfaction score on an annual survey.
Achievable	The DDA has existing façade improvement programs and TIF capacity. Expansion of existing financial tools (microloans, building improvement loans) is feasible within the planning horizon. Recruitment can be strengthened through a targeted outreach strategy.
Relevant	Business vitality is the backbone of downtown health and is a core DDA function. Addressing succession risk, attracting complementary businesses, and reducing vacancies directly fulfills the DDA's mission of business support and recruitment.
Time-bound	Business inventory and vacancy assessment by Q3 2026; expanded façade program by Q1 2027-28 Budget; evaluation and expansion of existing building improvement loan tools by Q3 2027; recruitment strategy active by Q2 2027.

KEY TACTICS	ASSIGNED	STATUS	DATE
Conduct a comprehensive business inventory and vacancy assessment, including succession risk profiling			
Expand façade improvement grant program. Increase dollar amounts and streamline the application process			
Create a business recruitment strategy targeting unique, niche retailers, restaurants, and third-space concepts			
Partner with the Chamber and local organizations to support business-to-business coordination and referrals			
Develop a business succession program connecting aging owners with potential buyers or successors			
Align physical improvements (lighting, signage, streetscape) with high-priority commercial corridors			
Develop marketing and messaging that promotes the value of opening or expanding a business in downtown Hastings			

Goal 3: Elevate the Everyday Downtown Experience

Specific	By December 2027, establish a year-round downtown activation calendar that includes a minimum of four recurring programs outside of major events, with at least one initiative targeting youth and families.
Measurable	Number and frequency of non-event activation programs; attendance tracking at new programming; youth and family engagement at DDA-supported activities; survey feedback on downtown experience outside of events.
Achievable	The DDA can coordinate activation through existing relationships with arts organizations, the Chamber, and property owners. Programming can begin with low-cost pilots in 2027, scaling based on demonstrated community uptake.
Relevant	Events alone do not sustain a vibrant downtown. Community input was clear: people want downtown to feel active and welcoming on an ordinary Tuesday, not just during concerts. Consistent activation builds the habits of use that drive long-term economic health.
Time-bound	Activation pilot programs launched by Q2 2027; full year-round calendar established by Q3 2027; youth/family initiative launched by Q3 2027.

KEY TACTICS	ASSIGNED	STATUS	DATE
Develop a year-round downtown activation calendar in collaboration with arts, entertainment, and business partners			
Launch a 'Late Till 8' or similar extended-hours initiative to encourage nighttime foot traffic			
Establish a recurring pop-up market or vendor series utilizing underused spaces, including parking lots near the river			
Create or support a youth-oriented program, event series, or facility partnership to draw younger residents downtown			
Encourage extended and coordinated business hours through a downtown merchant communication initiative			
Support outdoor dining expansion and seating amenity investment			
Activate Thornapple Plaza year-round including winter programming (ice, seasonal markets, lighting)			
Pilot seasonal pop-up events in underutilized spaces to test activation concepts before long-term investment			
Improve collaboration with the Downtown Merchants Association on downtown events, promotions, and business engagement initiatives			

Goal 4: Invest in Purpose-Driven Placemaking

Specific	By December 2029, complete a minimum of three capital infrastructure projects that improve year-round usability, connectivity, or comfort in the downtown district, evaluated through an everyday use lens.
Measurable	Number of projects completed and on budget; pre/post assessment of pedestrian counts and comfort; survey ratings on downtown usability and physical condition; maintenance plan completion rate.
Achievable	The DDA has TIF funding capacity and an established track record of infrastructure investment. Projects will be prioritized by community needs, seasonal usability, and maintenance sustainability. In addition to being coordinated with City capital planning cycles.
Relevant	Placemaking investments earn community trust when they serve everyday needs, not just aesthetics. Ensuring infrastructure is durable, accessible, and functional in all seasons protects past investment and supports future economic activity.
Time-bound	Capital project prioritization completed by Q2 2027; at least one project in design/construction by Q3 2027; three projects complete by December 2029.

KEY TACTICS	ASSIGNED	STATUS	DATE
Develop a formal capital planning process that evaluates projects through an everyday use and seasonal functionality lens			
Prioritize pedestrian infrastructure: sidewalk improvements, lighting, and safe crossings			
Invest in riverfront connectivity (i.e. Trail linkages, lighting, and access from the retail core)			
Evaluate the downtown and spray plaza for year-round functionality and identify targeted improvements			
Establish minimum standards and maintenance schedules for all publicly funded improvements			
Explore utility improvements including undergrounding wires and internet infrastructure			
Coordinate infrastructure projects with City capital plans to leverage matching resources			
Evaluate and activate underused parking areas near the river for temporary or permanent public use			

Goal 5: Build DDA Clarity, Trust & Transparency

Specific	By June 2027, implement a DDA communications and governance framework that measurably increases community understanding of the DDA's role, funding, and impact.
Measurable	Pre/post community survey measuring DDA awareness and trust; number of public-facing communications published quarterly; completion of board member orientation; attendance at public engagement events.
Achievable	The DDA can develop governance materials, a communication strategy, and public education tools with existing staff capacity and board commitment. Short-form digital content and an updated online presence are achievable in a single budget cycle.
Relevant	Trust is a prerequisite for effective implementation. Community input was explicit: residents support the DDA's work when they understand it. Transparency builds the political and social capital needed to execute this plan.
Time-bound	Orientation packet and board handbook complete by Q4 2026; communication strategy launched by Q1 2027; first annual community impact report published by Q3 2027.

KEY TACTICS	ASSIGNED	STATUS	DATE
Develop a board member orientation packet, handbook, and standard operating procedures for new and existing members			
Create a plain-language DDA explainer – what the DDA is, how TIF works, and how decisions are made			
Launch a short-form video series explaining the DDA's role and project updates (social media and local press)			
Establish a regular public communication cadence: quarterly updates, an annual impact report, and project spotlights			
Improve the DDA's digital presence – website, social media, and local media relationships			
Build relationships with the City, school district, and local press to create aligned messaging			
Host annual community input sessions to maintain engagement between major planning cycles			
Set and communicate clear expectations through “job description” for DDA board member roles, time commitments, and responsibilities			

Goal 6: Protect & Leverage Downtown’s Identity

Specific	By December 2028, develop and adopt a Downtown Hastings identity and branding framework that guides physical investment, business recruitment, programming, and communications.
Measurable	Completion of identity/branding framework; integration of identity guidelines into at least three DDA programs or projects; community recognition score on annual survey measuring downtown character preservation.
Achievable	Identity work can be completed through a focused community engagement and design process. The DDA has existing relationships with arts organizations, business owners, and community leaders who can contribute to this process.
Relevant	Hastings' authentic character (walkable, friendly, artsy, and distinctively small-town) is both a competitive advantage and a community value. Protecting it while enabling thoughtful growth is essential to long-term vitality.
Time-bound	Identity process launched by Q2 2027; framework adopted by Q4 2027; integration into DDA programs by Q2 2028.

KEY TACTICS	ASSIGNED	STATUS	DATE
Lead a community-centered process to define and articulate what makes downtown Hastings distinctively itself			
Develop a wayfinding and branding system that reflects Hastings' character and history			
Tell the story of downtown Hastings through signage, digital content, public art, and local media			
Integrate identity guidelines into the DDA's business recruitment criteria to attract businesses that fit the downtown's character			
Support adaptive reuse of historic buildings as a strategy for preserving character while enabling new uses			
Evaluate all capital projects and programming through an identity lens: does this feel like Hastings?			
Partner with local artists, schools, and cultural organizations to embed creativity into the downtown experience			

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

This plan uses three planning horizons to organize priorities. Time horizons are guides, not rigid constraints – the DDA should adapt based on capacity, funding, and opportunity.

HORIZON	TIMEFRAME	FOCUS
Short-Term (Quick Wins)	2026–2027	Governance, communications, activation pilots, parking study, façade expansion, board orientation, social district expansion
Mid-Term (Structural)	2027–2028	Parking/access policy adoption, business recruitment strategy, wayfinding installation, expanded financial tools, identity framework, capital project design
Long-Term (Big Impact)	2028–2031	Capital infrastructure delivery, vacancy reduction targets, full year-round programming, identity integration across all DDA programs, community trust benchmarks

PLAN GOVERNANCE & ANNUAL REVIEW

This Strategic Plan is a living document. The DDA Board commits to the following governance practices:

- Annual review of all six SMART goals against established metrics, conducted each fall
- Formal plan update every three years, incorporating new community input
- Quarterly progress updates shared publicly – through the DDA website, local media, and board meetings
- An annual community impact report published each spring, summarizing investment, outcomes, and upcoming priorities
- Board orientation for all new members, conducted within 60 days of appointment, using the DDA handbook

Accountability Commitment

The DDA will track progress against each goal's defined metrics and share results with the community. When priorities shift or timelines adjust, the DDA will communicate why – building the trust and transparency that make this plan possible.



CLOSING

A Downtown Worth Investing In

Downtown Hastings already has what many communities spend years trying to build: a strong sense of place, an engaged community, and real momentum. This plan asks the DDA to be a focused, transparent, and accountable steward of that momentum.

The six goals in this plan are not aspirational abstractions. They are grounded in what residents said, what the board identified, and what the DDA's mission requires. Executed with discipline and communicated with clarity, they will make downtown Hastings a place where people of all ages genuinely want to be: every day, every season, every year.



APPENDIX

- i. Resolution of the Hastings Downtown Development Authority*
- ii. Resolution of the Hastings City Council*

Note: space can be utilized to add notes, additional ideas, and/or thoughts

- iii. Goal 1–Improve Downtown Access & Functionality*
- iv. Goal 2–Strengthen the Downtown Business Environment*
- v. Goal 3–Elevate the Everyday Downtown Experience*
- vi. Goal 4–Invest in Purpose–Driven Placemaking*
- vii. Goal 5–Build DDA Clarity, Trust & Transparency*
- viii. Goal 6–Protect & Leverage Downtown’s Identity*

i. Resolution of the Hastings Downtown Development Authority

RESOLUTION NO. DDA-2026-_____

A RESOLUTION OF THE HASTINGS DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY ADOPTING THE 2026-2031 STRATEGIC PLAN

WHEREAS, the Hastings Downtown Development Authority (DDA) was established pursuant to the Downtown Development Authority Act, Act 57 of the Public Acts of 2018 of the State of Michigan, as amended, and is authorized to undertake planning, development, and financial activities within the designated downtown development district; and

WHEREAS, the DDA is committed to fulfilling its Mission to enhance and promote downtown Hastings by providing strategic infrastructure investments, business support and recruitment, developing and leveraging financial resources, and coordinating with arts and entertainment providers and others who share the desire to make downtown more vibrant, desirable, accessible, and sustainable; and

WHEREAS, the DDA engaged the Hastings community through three facilitated public workshops and a community survey, gathering meaningful input to inform the priorities of this Strategic Plan; and

WHEREAS, the Board of the Hastings DDA has reviewed, discussed, and refined a 2026–2031 Strategic Plan that establishes six SMART goals aligned with the DDA’s approved Mission and Vision, the findings of community engagement, and the authority granted by the DDA’s Development and Financial Plan; and

WHEREAS, the Board finds that adoption of this Strategic Plan serves the public interest and advances the goals of economic vitality, placemaking, access, transparency, and identity preservation in the downtown district;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Directors of the Hastings Downtown Development Authority that:

- The 2026–2031 Strategic Plan of the Hastings Downtown Development Authority is hereby adopted as the official strategic guidance of the DDA for the plan period.
- The DDA Board directs staff and committees to align annual work plans, budget requests, and project priorities with the goals and tactics established in this Strategic Plan.
- The DDA Board commits to conducting an annual review of progress against the Strategic Plan’s defined metrics and to sharing results publicly through an annual community impact report.
- This Strategic Plan shall be transmitted to the Hastings City Council with a request for concurrent adoption by resolution.

ADOPTED by the Board of Directors of the Hastings Downtown Development Authority at a duly noticed public meeting held on the _____ day of _____, 2026.

Chairperson, Hastings DDA Board of Directors

Date

Secretary, Hastings DDA Board of Directors

ii. Resolution of the Hastings City Council

RESOLUTION NO. CC-2026-___

A RESOLUTION OF THE HASTINGS CITY COUNCIL CONCURRING IN THE ADOPTION OF THE HASTINGS DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY 2026–2031 STRATEGIC PLAN

WHEREAS, the City of Hastings established the Hastings Downtown Development Authority (DDA) by Ordinance No. 195 on December 9, 1985, pursuant to the Downtown Development Authority Act, Act 57 of the Public Acts of 2018 of the State of Michigan, as amended; and

WHEREAS, the DDA is authorized to develop and implement plans for the improvement of the downtown development district, including the use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) as provided in the DDA’s Development and Financial Plan, most recently amended by the City Council on April 10, 2023; and

WHEREAS, the DDA has engaged the Hastings community through a transparent and inclusive planning process – including three public workshops and a community survey – to develop a strategic framework that reflects the values, priorities, and aspirations of the residents and businesses of Hastings; and

WHEREAS, the Hastings DDA Board of Directors has adopted Resolution No. DDA-2026-___ approving the 2026–2031 Strategic Plan and has transmitted it to the City Council for concurrent adoption; and

WHEREAS, the City Council finds that the 2026–2031 Strategic Plan is consistent with the DDA’s Development and Financial Plan, advances the public interest in a vibrant and economically healthy downtown, and appropriately directs the DDA’s priorities and resources for the plan period;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the City Council of the City of Hastings that:

- The City Council hereby concurs in and endorses the adoption of the Hastings Downtown Development Authority 2026–2031 Strategic Plan.
- The City Council affirms that the goals, tactics, and priorities set forth in the Strategic Plan are consistent with the City’s interests in the development and vitality of the downtown district.
- The City Council encourages ongoing collaboration between the DDA and City departments – including Community Development, Public Works, and Administration – to advance the shared objectives described in the Strategic Plan.
- The City Clerk is directed to transmit a certified copy of this Resolution to the Hastings Downtown Development Authority.

ADOPTED by the City Council of the City of Hastings at a duly noticed public meeting held on the _____ day of _____, 2026.

Mayor, City of Hastings

Date

City Clerk, City of Hastings

iii. Goal 1: Improve Downtown Access & Functionality

iv. Goal 2: Strengthen the Downtown Business Environment

v. *Goal 3: Elevate the Everyday Downtown Experience*

vi. Goal 4: Invest in Purpose-Driven Placemaking

vii. Goal 5: Build DDA Clarity, Trust & Transparency

viii. Goal 6: Protect & Leverage Downtown's Identity