

Downtown Missoula, Montana
Shopability Study



Prepared For:
Downtown Missoula Partnership

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23 May 2019
Revised 3 October 2019

INTRODUCTION



Image Caption: Downtown Missoula is filled with specialty shops and restaurants; Shown above is a view of Higgins Avenue looking south.

Executive Summary

Located in west-central Montana, Downtown Missoula is a vibrant college and resort city surrounded by spectacular, unspoiled nature. Its lively commercial district appeals to a mix of local residents, students and visitors. Replete with beautiful historic buildings including the iconic Wilma Theater, Downtown Missoula is also an arts and cultural hub that hosts film festivals, art fairs, farmers markets, ballet, opera and weekly food and music events. Its streets are highly walkable and feature a plethora of locally owned boutique stores, art galleries, trendy restaurants, coffee houses and breweries.

As part of earlier research, Gibbs Planning Group (GPG) found that downtown Missoula can presently support up to 100,800 additional square feet (sf) of retail and restaurant development,

generating as much as \$40 million in new sales by 2024. This new retail could include 70,000 sf of new retail stores and 30,000 sf of additional restaurant space equating to 25-40 new businesses. Alternatively, this growth could be absorbed by existing businesses through expansion or broadened marketing and operations.

Although the downtown is Missoula’s historical and cultural center, it only captures nine percent of the greater region’s total non-automotive sales. If the potential \$40 million growth in retail sales is achieved, this expansion would increase the downtown’s retail market share to 11 percent, representing a 23 percent increase in the downtown’s overall 2019 retail sales.

Background

Gibbs Planning Group, Inc. (GPG) has been retained by the Downtown Missoula Partnership to conduct an independent third-party analysis of its downtown shopping district. This analysis is intended to examine potential modifications to the downtown’s physical elements as well as existing policies as they relate to potentially enhancing its shopping experience. The field analysis was completed as part of the downtown master plan led by Dover, Kohl Partners.

It is intended that the implementation of these recommendations will improve pedestrian traffic, increase sales of existing businesses and encourage additional new retailers and restaurants to deploy in the downtown. These observations and recommendations are based on GPG’s prior experience with other urban shopping districts and industry best practices and have been calibrated to reflect the region’s unique characteristics and culture.

SHOPABILITY OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

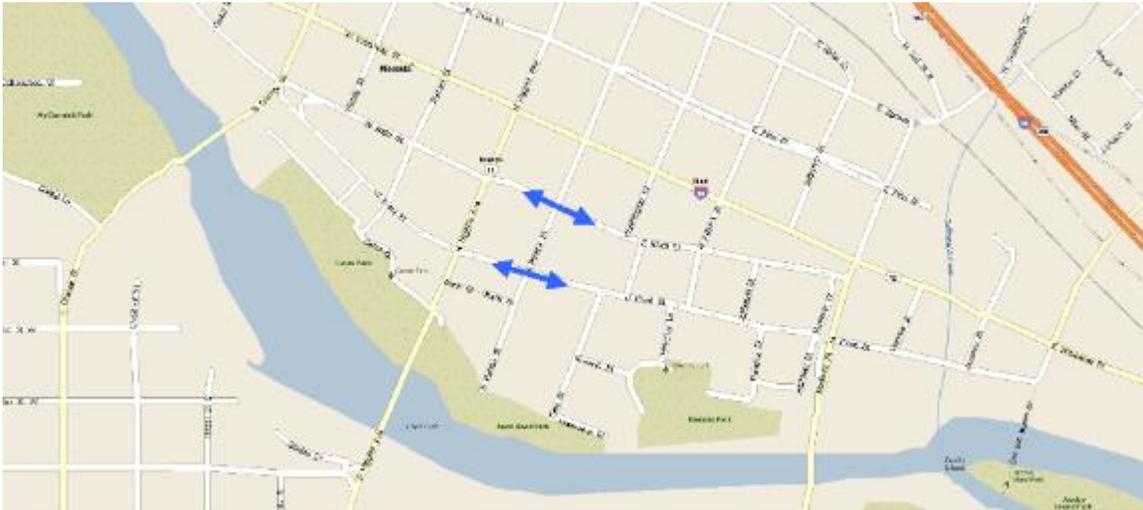
One-Way Streets



Observation: Front Street (pictured on the left) and Main Street (pictured on the right) are both one-way couplets inducing higher vehicular traffic speeds and limiting easy access to businesses for visitors.

Recommendation: Consider converting Front and Main Streets to two-way streets by implementing best practices of traffic calming street design. In addition to being easier to navigate in a car, two-way traffic forces motorists to drive slower and more cautiously, which makes streets safer for pedestrians and more conducive to shopping and dining. Furthermore,

two-way streets are more convenient because if a driver misses their retail destination, they can more easily turn around without having to make a loop around the block.



Wayfinding Signage



Observation: On many nearby local roads, wayfinding signage pointing towards the downtown’s central business district is either lacking or nonexistent. Additionally, such wayfinding signage is inadequate for vehicles once they get off I-90 via the main downtown exit (North Van Buren Street).

Recommendation: Install wayfinding signage at strategically located intersections surrounding the downtown’s central business district. Such intersections include Madison Street at East Broadway Street, South Higgins Avenue at South 6th Street and North Russell Street at West Broadway Street. Also, for vehicles that exit I-90 via North Van Buren Street, a large wayfinding sign should be placed at the intersection of North Van Buren Street and East Broadway Street (as shown above).

Alleys



Observation: Alleys represent an opportunity for improved walkability and small incubator businesses.

Recommendation: Alleys are an integral part of a downtown's urban design. The photo on the right illustrates their potential. In some instances, alleys are no longer needed for vehicular access but instead provide valuable pedestrian connections. To encourage their use, naming and signing each alley and providing some directional information would increase pedestrian comfort. Soft lighting and compatible uses such as outdoor dining can transform these spaces and expand the downtown experience. Even in instances where auto access is still required, pedestrian enhancements can significantly improve the downtown's walkability.

Public Art



Observation: The Missoula region is known for its appreciation of art and design. The downtown has a wide variety of public art (such as the mural shown on the far left which is displayed on West Broadway Street) that reinforces it as a unique destination for specialty shops and restaurants.

Recommendation: Maintain and expand public art installations throughout the downtown. Consider installing additional civic art locations and inviting fine artists to display sculpture and murals per the Sioux Falls, South Dakota and Grand Rapids, Michigan public art programs. Fine public art enlivens the downtown and reinforces it as a unique shopping destination. (The above

center image is public art in Monterrey, Mexico and the above right image was taken in downtown Winter Haven, Florida).

Historic Buildings



Observation: Although downtown Missoula features numerous beautifully restored historic buildings (such as the Studebaker and the Higgins Block, pictured above), the historic facades of some downtown buildings have been altered.

Recommendation: To the extent possible, historically significant building facades should be returned to their original designs. Paint and stucco should be removed to expose the original brick. Transparent glass should cover at least 70 percent of retail storefronts, and all glass block windows should be replaced (as they have no place in a successful downtown). Beyond merely enhancing aesthetic appeal, several studies suggest that historic preservation increases retail sales, particularly for small businesses. Additionally, it has been shown that so-called “heritage travelers” (tourists who visit historically significant sites) stay longer at their destinations and spend more money than other types of travelers.

Surface Parking Lots



Observation: Several prime corners for retail are occupied by surface parking lots, limiting the downtown’s walkability and cross-shopping.

Recommendation: Consider encouraging in-fill development for prime downtown properties and requiring new buildings to be located adjacent to the walkway.



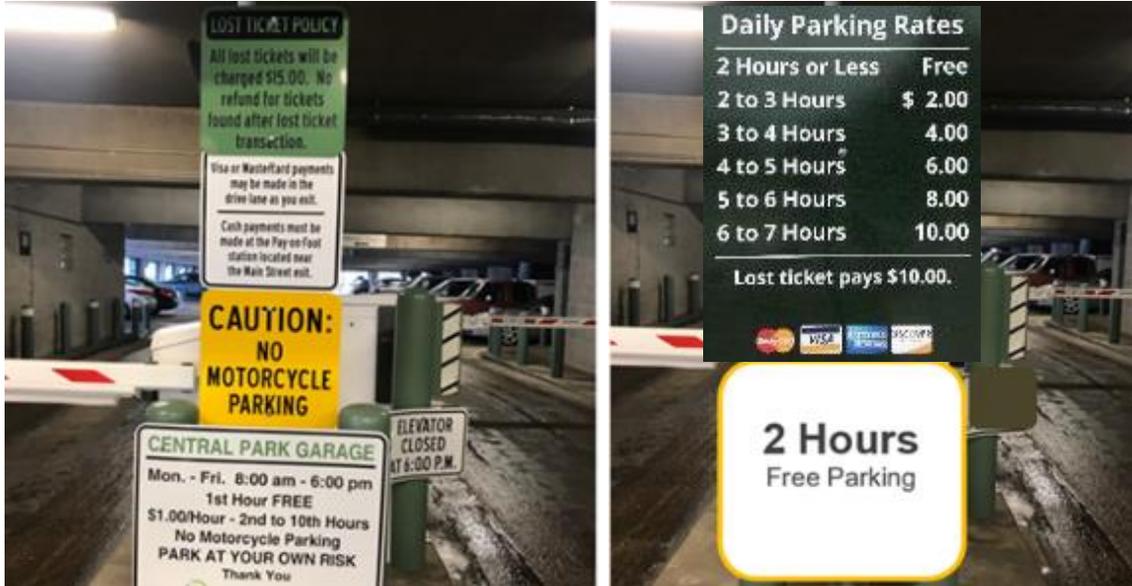
Observation: There are several surface parking lots along main thoroughfares in the downtown.

Recommendation: Gaps in development due to parking lots (sometimes referred to as “missing teeth”) create an undesirable pedestrian experience and compromise the walkability of the downtown with frequent curb cuts. Often, these gaps can be infilled with relatively inexpensive liner-type buildings with the trade-off of only a few parking spaces. Surface parking lots with frontage along primary streets should be studied for infill development, liner-buildings or moveable pop-up shops and at a minimum should be lined with a three-foot screen wall or decorative fence. Surface parking should be located behind buildings and not take up valuable frontage along main streets.

Parking Recommendations:

The parking recommendations in this study are from the point of view of retail shopability and represent just one of the many needs that parking in Downtown Missoula must serve. The Downtown Master Plan includes a detailed Parking Report considering the full breadth of parking across Downtown, which has been informed by this shopability study. The final recommendations and strategies for parking in Downtown are those in the Parking Report and Chapter 3 of the Master Plan.

Public Parking Decks



Observation: The city parking decks offer one hour of free parking, but the details are confusing.

Recommendation: Expand free parking in all decks to the first two hours and maintain \$1.00/hour rate for additional times (as shown on the right). Continue to allow free evening and Sunday parking in all decks. Repurpose payment kiosks at gates to accept cash and credit cards. Re-design parking rate graphics to emphasize free parking and promote the policy across the downtown and in media.



Observation: The elevators in both the Central Park and Park Place parking structures stop operating at 6:00 pm.

Recommendation: Elevators in the parking structures need to operate as long as the decks are open. Besides being an inconvenience for the general public, closing these elevators early limits parking access for the elderly, handicapped and others with mobility issues. Furthermore, the city should research whether this complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act and if special accommodations should be made to promote universal design.



Observation: The Central Park parking garage lacks street-level retail and disrupts pedestrian flow along Main Street.

Recommendations: Long parking structures that come directly up to the sidewalk are imposing to walk along and detract from the aesthetic of downtown. Therefore, small street-level retail stores should be added to parking structures, as shown on the right.



Observation: An overabundance of the downtown’s parking spaces appear to be leased, particularly in the parking structures.

Recommendation: The city should study whether its supply of public parking spaces is sufficient. Alternatively, as a customer-friendly gesture, signage ought to clearly delineate the convenient, ground floor spaces which are reserved for shoppers or non-permit holders. Also, permit utilization should be studied to determine whether it is productive to entirely ban the general public from parking on upper floors.



Observation: The Central Park parking structure is dirty and there are several signs of water damage and deferred maintenance that are affecting the comfort and efficiency of the parking experience.

Recommendation: Parking, whether on-street or in a garage, is often the first impression a visitor is given of a downtown or shopping destination. If the garage is dirty, poorly sighted, vandalized or dimly lit, a visitor is likely to believe the shopping area is as well, and will be less likely to return. Surfaces within the parking garage should be routinely cleaned or washed. Parking spaces should be restriped before fading causes motorists to guess about the location of a

space. Painted surfaces should be routinely washed and repainted as necessary. Vandalized surfaces should be repainted entirely – spot coverage is nearly as unappealing as vandalism.



Observation: Most wayfinding signage to the public parking lots is scaled to the pedestrian (as shown on the far left). Also, several of the public parking lots lack adequate exterior signage.

Recommendations: Wayfinding signage to the public lots should also be designed to direct motorists. Directional signs resembling that depicted in the central image above should be spread throughout the downtown at five or six locations. Furthermore, as shown on the far right, large parking signs should be displayed on the exterior of all downtown public parking lots.

Site Furnishings



Observation: Several downtown retailers have empty planters in front of their stores, and many public planters throughout the downtown are also empty.

Recommendation: The Downtown Missoula Partnership should encourage retailers to obtain flowers or other plantings for the front of their stores. To improve the streetscape, the city and the Downtown Missoula Partnership should also obtain and maintain its own planters at conspicuous locations. Beyond merely enhancing the streetscape, there is evidence that incorporating flowers and other plant life increases retail sales. Studies dating back to the 1970s

have found that plant life reduces levels of stress, and anxiety (which can be induced by shopping) makes potential shoppers less willing to buy goods. Empty planters should be removed during the winter months.



Observation: Some light poles downtown display effective banners and full flower baskets (as pictured on the right). However, many light poles downtown lack decoration and graphics.

Recommendation: Light poles should be utilized to enhance the streetscape and advertise the downtown. Hanging flower baskets and colorful unique banners can achieve these objectives. Empty light poles are not merely missed opportunities for marketing and streetscape enhancement, but also convey the negative impression that the downtown is generally not well maintained.

Signage



Observation: Laurel Creek Clothing and Gifts and the Missoula Club (both pictured above) are two of the many establishments downtown that have effective signage. However, a handful of other downtown retailers and restaurants do not utilize modern design standards for their signage.

Recommendation: Well-designed and properly scaled signage contributes to strong retail sales and an attractive downtown. Therefore, the city should encourage restaurants and retailers to use

signs that emphasize the identity of the business and the downtown’s historic character. Using hand-crafted signs designed by local artists and neon signs without plexiglass shields are two of the best strategies to achieve these objectives.



Observation: Although there are some artistic and custom-made sandwich boards in the downtown (such as those pictured above), there are many other generic sandwich boards that lack downtown character.

Recommendation: Sandwich boards should appear handmade and specific to the business they are advertising, rather than store-bought or generic.

Storefronts



Observation: Some of downtown Missoula’s stores and restaurants have dark-tinted or mirrored windows. These prevent would-be customers from seeing the interior of a business and detracts from the street experience by effectively creating a blank wall.

Recommendation: Shoppers feel unsafe entering a business they cannot see inside. Dark-tinted windows limit the opportunity for window shopping and pedestrians are known to walk faster along tinted storefronts. As a result, businesses are compelled to use tacky signage or other gimmicks to alert shoppers that there is an operable business behind the dark façade. While glare from the sun and greenhouse heat gain are valid concerns, modern glass can avoid these adverse conditions while maintaining a clear appearance. Furthermore, shades, blinds, sails, louvers and working shutters are a few design solutions which can increase architectural variety and provide relief from the sun. Lastly, limited utility cost savings from tinted windows would likely be offset by the 12 to 20 percent increase in sales experienced by stores with natural lighting.



Observation: Many of downtown Missoula’s shop entrances are covered in signage, stickers and decals.

Recommendation: The first experience a shopper has with a store is the entrance. Studies have shown a direct relationship between the size of the font used and the amount of clutter in a door or window and the perceived value of goods inside. Smaller font and few decals will lead customers to believe they are going to receive excellent service, unique products and a good value. A cluttered storefront is intimidating in its limited view of the store’s interior and suggests the experience inside will be equally confusing. Stores should be limited to one temporary sign or flyer per store and one-square foot of permanent signage per 10-feet of linear storefront.



Observation: Vacant storefront displays appear to be unregulated.

Recommendation: Downtown vacancy happens in every city, but vacant storefront display standards can mitigate the negative impacts. The city should have a standard “Coming Soon!” decal with information for the appropriate city contact. Leasing posters should also be uniform in dimension and limited in number. “We’re Moving” type signs should be taken down within a reasonable timeframe of the store closing and event specific notices should be removed immediately after the event. Ideally, property owners should be encouraged to create window displays with local information or celebrating some aspect of the city’s history or culture. Similarly, the city may work with property owners to lease vacant window space for a reasonable fee to curate city designed displays and offer consistent messaging.



Observation: Some of downtown Missoula’s storefronts have sign-bands that are blank.

Recommendation: Blank sign-bands can detract from the streetscape and potential customers may pass by a store without a sign-band because they are not aware what is offered inside. Therefore, all storefronts should have signage on the sign-band, preferably that is custom-made.

Events



Observation: Downtown Missoula has a number of successful independent retailers who report that downtown events help stimulate shopper traffic and sales.

Recommendation: Continue to sponsor downtown events such as River City Roots Festival, Symphony in the Park, Out to Lunch in Downtown Tonight, Garden City Brewfest, Missoula Made Fair and farmers markets.



Pictured above: International Council of Shopping Center's (ICSC) annual ReCON conference in Las Vegas.

Observation: Although downtown Missoula has a plethora of high-quality retailers and restaurants, it could do more to actively recruit these types of businesses.

Recommendation: The city should attend national and regional ICSC leasing conferences and expand its business recruitment resources.

Public Market



Pictured above: Charleston City Market in Charleston, South Carolina (left) and Redding Market in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (right).

Observation: The downtown lacks a grocery store that is within walking distance of its other shops and restaurants.

Recommendation: Downtown Missoula should have a public market that offers prepared foods, produce, fish, cheeses, meat and baked goods. This type of market would encourage more people to live downtown and be a major tourist attraction.

Sidewalk Repairs



Observation: The pedestrian walkway on the Higgins Avenue bridge is in disrepair.

Recommendation: The Higgins Avenue pedestrian walkway serves the important function of linking the popular “hip strip” with the rest of the downtown. While its damaged pavement is an inconvenience for pedestrians, it presents a serious safety hazard for the downtown’s many bicyclists. Furthermore, the bridge’s condition creates a negative impression in the mind of the shopper. Shoppers tend to associate an unkept public realm with crime, homelessness, poor fiscal

stewardship, lackadaisical management and a place that is past its prime; the least of which is counterproductive for a successful downtown.

CODE REVIEW

Zoning Ordinance & Design Excellence Overlay

Generally, the Zoning Ordinance and Design Excellence Overlay are exceptional and sufficiently communicate advisable development practices in context with downtown Missoula. However, there are a few specific standards which should more explicitly control or prohibit practices detrimental to walkable shopping environments.

Recommendation: As mentioned previously, tinted or reflective glass effectively creates a blank wall and makes it difficult for shoppers to view the goods and services being offered inside of a store. Tinted or reflexive glass should be prohibited for all street level retail within the downtown. Furthermore, in terms of signage standards, internally illuminated box signs should also be prohibited within the downtown as they emit an unattractive light and are generally not up to the standard of a desirable shopping district. Also, the sign standard should more explicitly limit the size of signage on downtown buildings. As a rule of thumb, each business should be limited to 1 square-foot of signage for each linear foot of storefront. As an incentive, the code could offer size bonuses for creative or sculptural signage.

Shopability Analysis Implementation Strategies

Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair the pedestrian walkway on the Higgins Avenue Bridge • Install effective wayfinding signage at strategically located intersections surrounding downtown • Install uniform signage for public parking garages • Modify parking time limits in public decks* • Clean and maintain public parking decks • Place flowers and other planting at conspicuous locations downtown • Continue to sponsor downtown events • Attend national and regional ICSC leasing conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convert Front Street and Main Street to two-way streets • Review existing storefront standards and revise to promote exceptional storefront design • Maintain and expand downtown public art installations • Study whether the number of public parking spaces in downtown parking decks is sufficient* • Expand business recruitment efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage in-fill development for prime downtown property • Pedestrianize alleys throughout the downtown • Recruit a public market to the downtown • Add street-level retail to the Central Park parking garage

**See the Parking Study and Chapter 3 of the Downtown Master Plan for final parking recommendations*