Rockside Road

AREA PLAN

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ROCKSIDE ROAD
AREA PLAN

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Ed Foley, Seven Hills Planning Commission
The Process

The Area Planning process for the City of Independence took place over an eight-month period. The final results of the process represent a blending of conclusions drawn from technical research and the intuition and expertise of local stakeholders and the community at large.

TECHNICAL RESEARCH

- **Analysis of existing physical and market conditions** - The planning team gathered data and performed an analysis of the key physical and economic conditions and trends.
- **Review of existing development regulations** - The city’s existing code was critically reviewed to identify opportunities and possible limitations.
- **Review of existing planning material** - The planning team gathered all relevant past plans and reviewed for key content.
- **Mapping of key environmental constraints** - Each of the planning areas environmental constraints were mapped using GIS.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- **Results from two public planning workshops** - The planning process included two rounds of community meetings where participants were able to review the findings and share their thoughts on the direction of the area plans.
- **Work of the Planning Committee** - The process was led by a fourteen-member Planning Committee representative of a wide range of community interests.
- **Stakeholder Interviews** - Dozens of interviews were conducted with key stakeholders including land developers, politicians, business owners, citizens, and others.

CITY COUNCIL

City Council participated in two work sessions where they shared their ideas and direction for the planning areas.

THE AREA PLANS

The final plans include the intuition of the public, the direction of leadership, and the technical understanding of the planning team and its research.
Executive Summary
This report focuses on the Rockside Road planning area. Four additional planning areas were evaluated and are identified on this map.
Purpose

Rockside Road is known regionally as one of the premier office locations in all of Northeast Ohio. This reputation was hard earned and is well deserved. The Area Planning process was initiated to develop a vision for the future based on an understanding of existing conditions and trends. The public, stakeholders, and community leaders from both Independence and Seven Hills were engaged in a discussion about possibilities for the planning area. This plan combines their intuition with technical research to produce a set of recommendations designed to result in a more resilient district that allows for a greater diversity of uses and produces a more dynamic environment for residents and workers.

Rockside Today

The corridor is roughly 1,000 acres shared between the cities of Independence (800 acres) and Seven Hills (190 acres). The area gained a regional identity in the 1980’s, 90’s and 00’s as a top office destination in the Cleveland Metropolitan area. Through this period, many office buildings, 12 hotels and over 20 restaurants were constructed, all with tremendous access to downtown Cleveland, Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, and Northeast Ohio. While still a productive regional employment node, the cities of Independence and Seven Hills initiated an Area Planning process to consider the future of Rockside Road.

KEY FINDINGS

The entire corridor is approaching build out.

240 AC

REMAINING DEVELOPABLE LAND

Buildings are nearing 30 years old on average.

1987

AVERAGE YEAR-BUILT FOR MULTI-TENANT OFFICE BUILDINGS

The city swells each day by three times its resident population.

+21,000

DAYTIME POPULATION

Developable land includes areas not limited by severe topographic or wetland limitations. Between the two cities the corridor is just over 1,000 acres in total.

Of the 4 million sq ft of office space within Independence and along the corridor, roughly 1.7 million, or 43%, is defined as class “A”. As buildings age their class ratings typically decline.

The residential population of approximately 7,100 nearly triples during the day due to commuters and visitors to the community. Of the roughly 21,000 workers, fewer than 2,000 are residents of Independence.
The Vision for Rockside

The Rockside Road corridor should leverage its reputation as a premiere office location in metropolitan Cleveland to launch a new development concept that meets the emerging demand from businesses and their employees for a more walkable and mixed-use office district. This new pattern should be emphasized in future development projects and also encouraged when redevelopment occurs. The Brecksville Road corridor, north of Rockside Road, should be considered as an area for possible transition from residential to commercial uses. In the spirit of collaboration, Independence should consider cooperating with Seven Hills on initiatives of mutual benefit within the Rockside Road corridor.

Overall Recommendations

1. Improve connectivity for pedestrian and vehicular traffic
   Connections across the planning area are key to improving the level of service for Rockside Road. Currently, there are limited east-west connections.

2. Continue to market key development sites
   A number of strategic development sites still exist throughout the corridor. These should be marketed creatively to maximize their potential.

3. Consider rezoning the residential parcels along Brecksville Road north of Rockside Road
   A zoning change in this area could result in an area with uses more consistent with the remainder of the Rockside Road corridor. This area also provides an opportunity for small businesses to possibly own property in the Rockside Road planning area.

4. Encourage redevelopment of aging office buildings to increase connectivity, promote walkability, and build a vertical mix of uses
   As aging buildings reach the end of their useful lives, redevelopment should be consistent across the corridor and meet the emerging demand for walkable, mixed-use office districts.

5. Allow for the infill of parcels within existing development
   Allowing for a greater intensity or utilization of a parcel may incentivize property owners to reconsider unproductive spaces on their land.

6. Create park and gathering space opportunities in the area
   The corridor has no public parks, open spaces, or gathering spaces. A suitable location should be identified in each quadrant to provide future opportunities.

7. Improve the overall aesthetics of the corridor
   The identity and aesthetics of the Rockside Road corridor could be improved through strategic initiatives that add visual interest to the public realm.

8. Facilitate development of the parcels in the Development Priority Area of the planning area with a competitive product that maximizes the area’s potential
   The Development Priority Area of the planning area contains approximately 70 acres. This constitutes one of the largest amounts of developable land in the planning area.

9. Work with Seven Hills to create a mutually beneficial development program for the Rockside Road corridor
   The City of Seven Hills worked in collaboration with Independence to develop its own Area Plan for undeveloped parcels along Rockside Road. The final development program will help improve the overall competitiveness of the Rockside Road corridor. In the long-term, the two cities should pursue an agreement to work together to improve the corridor.
The City of Independence Rockside Plan Overview is shown here. In addition, the City of Seven Hills worked with Independence to develop its own area plan for several undeveloped parcels along Rockside Road. The Seven Hills final development program includes residential, retail, office, and civic uses, and will help improve the overall competitiveness of the corridor, rather than directly compete with plans within Independence. Together, the Independence and Seven Hills plans enhance the overall viability of the corridor as a live-work destination.
Development Priority Area

The northwest quadrant of the planning area contains approximately 70 acres of undeveloped land. This constitutes one of the largest amounts of developable land in the planning area. In 2014, Independence purchased two parcels within the area comprising approximately 33 acres. A conceptual development framework has been developed for this area and the surrounding parcels. This concept includes a potential development yield for the area and aligns with the emerging market for walkable, mixed-use employment centers.

DEVELOPMENT INTENT

1. Develop into a denser, mixed-use district with residential opportunities
   The development pattern for Rockside will integrate uses into a walkable framework that creates a live, work, and play (24-hour) district.

2. Implement a transportation and pedestrian framework to improve connectivity
   The future street framework will seek to improve connectivity. New connections will support on-street parking and create a safe, pleasurable experience for pedestrians.

3. Create a 24-hour district with a myriad of amenities for workers and residents
   The Development Priority Area will be a destination for workers and residents alike. The district will include amenities such as restaurants, retail, and entertainment, along with residential options.

4. Dedicate green space for active and passive recreation and connect to existing natural areas
   Green and open spaces will be a priority for future projects located within the Development Priority Area. These new spaces will connect to existing natural areas within the Rockside Road corridor.

5. Offer flexibility to accept a drop-in corporate headquarters campus
   The new development pattern for will not preclude the incorporation of a large corporate “drop-in” development. Recent regional examples prove this pattern is a more competitive model for such large-scale users.
CONCEPTUAL PLAN

The Priority Development Area, at just over 70 acres, represents the largest contiguous set of developable parcels within the Rockside Road corridor, and the entire city. In the conceptual plan, the area would transform into a vibrant, mixed-use district, with high-quality office space supporting restaurants, retail, and new residential options for workers. The Priority Development Area can usher in a new direction for the Rockside Road corridor and meet the strong regional demand for mixed-use office centers rather than auto-centric office parks.

DEVELOPMENT YIELD

The conceptual land use plan illustrates yield potential for the planning area. Although the current market would not support immediate absorption of the development program, phasing of the project over several years would spread out the demand over several cycles of the market. The plan includes:

• Between 1.4 and 1.6 million square feet of mixed-use employment space. This portion of the planning area would allow for a diversity of uses including office, retail and dining. The concept can also accommodate a large drop-in corporate headquarters.

• There is an opportunity and market for mixed density residential options designed for employees within the Rockside Road corridor.

Building Footprints

Proposed building locations are schematic in nature and are representations of scale and form. As development takes place, different lot organizations may suit certain uses. Relationships and building density illustrate preferences in character and public spaces to inform future development.
The proposed street hierarchy is shown above. All streets in this area should balance pedestrian and vehicular movements, and provide ample on-street parking. Interior streets will be more narrow and serve as connections to surface and structured parking.
Findings & Analysis

This chapter provides an analysis of the key existing physical, character, and economic conditions and trends within the planning area. These findings were developed through field analysis, mapping and research. The results of these findings along with the information received through stakeholder interviews and the public workshops serve as the foundation for the recommendations.
Background and Context

The entire Rockside Road planning area includes just under 1,000 acres shared between the cities of Independence and Seven Hills. Just over 800 acres area within Independence and 190 in Seven Hills. In Independence, the planning area is bisected north to south by I-77, and east to west by Rockside Road. The Seven Hills component to the west straddles the frontage of Rockside Road, with a majority of its land area (160 acres) to the south. Starting in the 1970’s through the 2000’s, the Rockside Road corridor developed into the premier office location in Northeast Ohio. Today, the corridor maintains a strong reputation among real estate brokers due to its accessibility and proximity to downtown Cleveland.

Existing Land Use

Due to the size and complexity of the Rockside Road planning area, the land use assessment has been divided into four quadrants within Independence along with a separate sub-area within Seven Hills.

1. NORTHEAST QUADRANT

The northeast quadrant of the planning area contains the greatest diversity of uses. The Rockside Road corridor includes a mix of commercial uses including offices, retail and hotels. Farther to the north along Rockside Place and Rockside Woods Boulevard, the development pattern and parcel size expands. This area includes the Kent State University College of Podiatric Medicine and the Embassy Suites Hotel. A number of undeveloped lots lining the eastern portion of Rockside Woods Boulevard are currently being marketed. The Brecksville Road corridor north of Rockside Road is primarily residential with some scattered office and non-profit uses.

2. SOUTHEAST QUADRANT

The southeast quadrant of the planning area (south of Rockside Road and east of I-77) contains the highest density of commercial uses. Office, hotel, retail, and restaurants cluster within this quadrant at a higher density than anywhere else in the Rockside planning area. The quadrant is crossed by a number of private and public drives, and includes a hilly terrain. Buildings at the southern extreme of the quadrant can view the skyline of downtown Cleveland in the distance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The full planning area includes the cities of Independence and Seven Hills.</th>
<th>The corridor stretches just under two miles through Independence.</th>
<th>The entire corridor is approaching buildout.</th>
<th>Buildings are nearing 30 years old, on average.</th>
<th>The city swells each day by three times its resident population.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,000 ac</td>
<td>800 ac</td>
<td>240 ac</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>+21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL ROCKSIDE PLANNING AREA</td>
<td>ROCKSIDE ROAD PLANNING AREA WITHIN INDEPENDENCE</td>
<td>ACRES REMAINING OF DEVELOPABLE LAND</td>
<td>AVERAGE YEAR-BUILT FOR MULTI-TENANT OFFICE BUILDINGS</td>
<td>DAYTIME POPULATION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. SOUTHWEST QUADRANT

The southwest quadrant of the planning area (west of I-77 and south of Rockside Road) is primarily zoned office. Just over 80 percent of the land area is comprised of office buildings and their supporting surface parking lots. A hotel and gas station are the only non-office uses within the quadrant. There are several undeveloped lots to the south that are currently being marketed as future office sites.

4. NORTHWEST QUADRANT

The northwest quadrant includes the Development Priority Area and (west of I-77 and north of Rockside Road) has a diversity of existing uses. The Crown Centre buildings are two of the largest office towers in the city and in the region, outside of the downtown Cleveland market. Several more large office complexes line West Creek and Rockside Road. There are four hotels along Jefferson Road, and three stand alone restaurants lining Rockside Road to the west.

5. SEVEN HILLS SUB-AREA

The Seven Hills sub-area of Rockside is primarily residential or undeveloped. It includes five office buildings on four parcels to the north of Rockside Road along Lombardo Center. The remaining acreage is made up of either single-family residential or large undeveloped lots. A recent condominium development was completed at the far west of the sub-area in the last five years and a senior housing project is currently being completed in the adjacent northern parcel.
City of Independence, Ohio

Character Assessment

**Strong regional identity.** The Rockside Road corridor has maintained a strong reputation across the Cleveland metropolitan area as a top office location. The area developed through the 1970’s, 80’s and 90’s because of its competitive location. Office growth quickly spurred the development of support services such as retail, restaurants, and lodging. Today, the aging office stock, perceived congestion, and emerging competition from a resurgent downtown Cleveland, have challenged the corridor’s position in the regional office market. Despite these new challenges, much of the planning area’s office buildings continue to demand competitive rents and remain relatively well occupied.

**An auto dependent development pattern.** The planning area is auto oriented with many broad thoroughfares and large surface parking lots. Development occurred in a period that emphasized auto-accessability over pedestrian safety or comfort. The result is a relatively low density environment with limited pedestrian connectivity between key uses (for example, retail and office uses).

**A limited street network.** The street network relies primarily on Rockside Road (east-west) and Brecksville Road (north-south). Access roads to uses off of Rockside Road are along secondary streets with limited connectivity across the area. There are few route options and a limited number of intersections. This forces traffic onto the main arterials for nearly all trips, adding to congestion. Inter-district travel, for example during lunchtime, can create traffic even during non-peak hours.

**Limited pedestrian accessibility and connectivity.** While sidewalks line some thoroughfares in the area, the distance between uses is often great and lacking visual interest to motivate pedestrians. Additionally, the wide thoroughfares are perceived unsafe for crossing and discourage walking.

**Varying lot sizes and orientations.** A variety of parcel sizes and orientations exist in the planning area. There are a number of deep residential lots along Brecksville Road and within the eastern portion of Seven Hills.

**No designated park land, but attractive open spaces.** There are no parks within either jurisdiction’s component of the planning area. The undeveloped areas offer a sharp and natural contrast to the surrounding developed environment. Wildlife can often be seen within these areas.

**Aging of the office stock.** With the most recent multi-tenant office building construction completed in 2002, the average year-built among multi-tenant office buildings within the planning area is 1987.

A number of buildings within the planning area have partial vacancy. While many factors can contribute to vacancy rates, the age and maintenance of buildings certainly play a role in their final marketability.

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**EXPLAINING OFFICE CLASS**

Class of office space is subjective and is relative to the market at a given time. For example, some buildings today that are advertised as Class A could be considered Class B due to factors such as age and level of maintenance, or market trends such as changing needs of workforce and tenants.
Development Constraints

Steep slopes have influenced past development and will continue to impact future projects. Land with a 30 percent grade or greater is considered prohibitive or costly for development. There are approximately 300 acres within the planning area that meet or exceed this threshold. The western portion of the Seven Hills sub-area is particularly challenged as the lots are both sloped and relatively shallow. In Independence, large sloped areas exist in the northeast and northwest portions of the planning areas.

A small amount of land (less than 12 acres) is constrained by existing wetlands. The largest contiguous wetland area exists along a tributary for the West Creek. West Creek Conservancy has initiated projects along the watershed to improve the health and vitality of the stream. This group would have an interest in limiting development, especially within the riparian corridor.

Arterial street network contributes to congestion. The area has excellent regional access provided by the I-480 and I-77 interchange, but there is a very limited existing street network to provide internal connection. Rockside Woods Boulevard North, North Rockside Place, West Creek Road, Oak Tree Boulevard, and Lombardo Center all dead end and force traffic back onto Rockside Road. Aside from the interstate, Brecksville Road is currently the only north-south route traversing the planning area.

Future development, especially in the northeast quadrant, could seriously challenge existing sewer capacity. Potential development in this area could possibly be stalled by the lack of capacity within the existing sewer.

The rocky substrate provides an additional hurdle for future development. The area’s name “Rockside”, is in reference to several quarries that existed well before the commercial corridor developed. This tough substrate can be difficult and costly to grade or remove for development, and typically requires blasting.

Rockside infrastructure handles today’s traffic but may become stressed without future improvements or expansions. Current traffic levels result in heavy congestion around the I-77 ramps and Brecksville Road intersection. If traffic congestion increases in these areas, the Rockside corridor may become an unattractive or inefficient location for business.

Source: US Census - Longitudinal Employer Household Dynamics
Economic Analysis

Complete details of the economic analysis can be found in the appendix.

Declining absorption in the Northeast Ohio office market since 2001. Overall, the market has absorbed an average of 520,000 square feet of office space per year. Annual figures have ranged from negative 900,000 square feet to more than 1.4 million square feet of positive absorption. Despite this instability in the regional market, Independence has averaged roughly 50,000 square feet of absorption each year since 2001.

Demand for office space in Independence is still generated to a large extent based on the competitive advantages of the city’s location and logistics. The city is served by a transportation network accessing downtown Cleveland, east and west suburbs, Akron-Canton, and Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

Current office product is misaligned with emerging demand for walkable, mixed-use environments. Downtown Cleveland is attracting many new tenants due to this preference. Urban, mixed-use locations are becoming more attractive than single purpose office parks for some businesses that are trying to recruit young “smart” tech and service workers. Downtown Cleveland is once again attracting large businesses due to its re-emerging “vibe,” central location, and amenity value.

New construction within Rockside would need to balance the slow absorption rate with the new demand in layout and environment. In order to attract office tenants and absorb space at a higher rate, there is a need to consider reformulating a portion of the Rockside Road corridor to establish more walkable, mixed-use opportunities.

Although volatile, the Northeast Ohio office market has had positive net absorption since 2001.

520,000 sq ft
ANNUAL REGIONAL MARKET ABSORPTION AVERAGE SINCE 2001

The Independence office market has remained relatively stable since 2001.

50,000 sq ft
ANNUAL CITY ABSORPTION AVERAGE SINCE 2001

Accessibility remains the primary competitive advantage for the Independence office market.

13 min
AVERAGE TIME TO DOWNTOWN CLEVELAND

15 min
AVERAGE TIME TO CLEVELAND HOPKINS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

30 min
AVERAGE TIME TO DOWNTOWN AKRON

Even without intervention the planning area should see positive net absorption in office space over the next five years.

164-265,000 sq ft

The Independence office market represents roughly 4% of the regional share.

4,000,000 sq ft
TOTAL OFFICE SQUARE FOOTAGE WITHIN ROCKSIDE ROAD CORRIDOR

Full-service rents among the highest in the region.

$19 per sq ft
FULL-SERVICE RENT DEMAND

There is significant competition for office tenants around Northeast Ohio. For many years, Rockside Road benefitted from the flight of tenants from downtown Cleveland. However, downtown has recently been regaining some of its appeal for certain types of businesses. Several companies have relocated to downtown from the suburbs. At the same time, new mixed-use nodes on the east and west sides of Cleveland are drawing increasing numbers of office uses.

Rockside Road corridor is likely to capture new demand for at least 265,000 leasable square feet over the next five years (2014-2019). This number does not include lateral shifts within the existing market, such as tenants moving within the Rockside Road corridor or consolidating from buildings somewhere in the region to a site in Rockside.
Trends in Office Demand

While the age of development and other physical characteristics contribute to the health of Rockside, there are a number of external trends that are influencing office space demand. These trends include: changing economic conditions, changing workforce, and changing needs of building owners and tenants.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Lukewarm suburban office outlook. Since the peak of the recession, rents and vacancy rates for suburban office (regionally and nationwide) have made only modest improvements, while many urban areas have begun to rebound. This trend is partly due to shifting market preferences, but also because many suburbs were hit harder by the recession, leaving a relatively large supply to absorb.

Increasing regional competition. While Independence has long dominated the suburban office market in Northeast Ohio, much of the office product is older than in other markets such as Westlake or Beachwood. Competition between suburban communities has intensified with the reemergence of downtown Cleveland as a viable and desirable business location.

Economic uncertainty. Due to ongoing uncertainty about the national economy since the Great Recession, tenants are reluctant to sign multi-year leases and want flexibility to increase or reduce their space as their needs change. Uncertainty about lease commitments creates an obstacle for the renovation of existing development as well as the construction of new development. Tougher lending standards make it challenging for developers to finance construction.

WORKFORCE

Lifestyle preferences changing work environments. Whether they desire suburban lifestyles or more urban ones, a growing proportion of young adults are choosing where they want to live before they begin looking for job opportunities. As a group, younger workers (as well as those approaching retirement) tend to prefer walkable, amenity-rich environments with authentic character.

Jobs follow talent. Many high-growth, technology-oriented businesses face strong competition for talented workers and consider lifestyle preferences in their decisions about where to locate. Reflecting those preferences, businesses increasingly seek office settings that are walkable and close to gathering places, recreation, restaurants, entertainment, retail services, transit, and housing.

Broader workforce needed for growing businesses. The moderate-income segment of the workforce, largely college-educated young professionals, are needed by growing business sectors. Compared to older generations, this group tends to prefer living close to their place of work, driving less, and are more likely to use alternative modes of transportation including cycling, walking, and transit.

NEEDS OF BUILDING OWNERS/TENANTS

Less space. Tenants tend to need less space overall per employee than in the past. Companies are getting by (or doing more) with fewer employees. They are consolidating multiple offices to single locations, allowing more telecommuting and flexible work time, and adopting cubicle-free open floor plans with shared spaces.

Better differentiation. While there is still a large market for suburban office space, competition for tenants is intense. Tenants for suburban offices tend to want generous amounts of parking, “environmentally friendly” buildings, nearby amenities (preferably within walking distance), visibility and signage, as well as technology infrastructure.

More flexibility. Buildings with flexible designs that can accommodate many types of users and adapt to changing tenant needs tend to be the most successful over the long-term. In some communities, property owners need regulatory flexibility or technical assistance to help them make changes to their buildings or properties in order to keep them competitive.
Recommendations
RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter outlines a set of key physical and policy recommendations for the Rockside Road corridor. The collective aim of these actions is to produce a stronger, more resilient corridor that continues to serve as a fiscal asset to the City of Independence and provide a more diverse, amenity rich district for residents and workers. The recommendations are both physical, including conceptual land use plans for development and redevelopment, and policy driven, including recommendations for legislative action. Each high-level recommendation includes several targeted strategies for achieving the larger objective.

High Level Recommendations

1. Improve connectivity for pedestrian and vehicular traffic
2. Continue to market key development sites
3. Consider rezoning the residential parcels along Brecksville Road north of Rockside Road
4. Encourage redevelopment of aging office buildings to increase connectivity, promote walkability, and build a vertical mix of uses
5. Allow for the infill of parcels within existing development
6. Create park and gathering space opportunities in the area
7. Improve the overall aesthetics of the corridor
8. Facilitate development of the parcels in the Development Priority Area with a competitive product that maximizes the area’s potential
9. Work with Seven Hills to develop a mutually beneficial development program for the Rockside Road corridor
1. Improve connectivity for pedestrian and vehicular traffic

Presently, there are limited secondary east-west connections for motorists and few options for pedestrians. This funnels considerable traffic onto Rockside Road, including trips with origins and destinations inside the corridor. Introducing new vehicular connections could help reduce some congestion caused by these internal movements. Improvements to pedestrian and cycling infrastructure could improve the practicality and safety of these options, potentially reducing some daily traffic stress on the corridor.

STRATEGIES

1. Connect Rockside Woods Boulevard North to Brecksville Road

   The city should consider beginning the process of completing a connection from Rockside Road to Brecksville Road along Rockside Woods Boulevard North. This connection could alleviate a portion of the congestion at the intersection of Rockside Road and Brecksville Road.

2. Explore the costs and benefits of expanding the marginal road network and a realigned southbound entrance to I-77 from Rockside Road

   The southeast portion of the planning area has the highest density of commercial uses. The overlapping development of parcels and the topography have created a tangled network of parking lots, private roads, and congestion. The right-of-way behind the Liberty Commons retail development should be used to connect Brecksville Road to Rockside Woods Boulevard South. This would allow traffic to cross the area to Brecksville Road without being forced to enter Rockside Road. The realignment of the freeway entrance could provide a frontage or access road that would connect with an extension of Acorn Drive.

3. Explore an exit from I-480 into the Development Priority Area of the Rockside Road planning area

   In the past, the construction of a full interchange was explored at I-480 west of the I-77 interchange. This initiative was abandoned due to the intense weaving and traffic caused by the system interchange less than a half mile from the proposed project. An exit-only ramp from eastbound I-480 could be extended into the northwest of the planning area to alleviate some traffic at the I-77 and Rockside interchange and provide inbound access to the planning area.
4. **Extend connections across jurisdictional lines into Seven Hills**

Patriots Way is the only street (other than Rockside Road) connecting Seven Hills to Independence. As development occurs in the Priority Development Area of Independence, and in the far northeast parcels of Seven Hills, connections across the boundary should be prioritized to improve east-west options. Better connections would also improve the overall walkability of existing and future development.

5. **Encourage connections through existing surface parking lots**

Small efforts have been made to extend private roads through the existing surface parking lots to improve connectivity throughout the planning area. These projects help to alleviate traffic on Rockside Road by providing alternative routes for local trips. One such project connects Rockside Corners Shopping Center with Rockside Woods Boulevard by way of a privately maintained access drive. Opportunities such as this should be identified and encouraged through creative incentives in future development or redevelopment efforts.

6. **Consider the comfort and safety of pedestrians with future road improvements and connections**

The planning area today is oriented strongly toward moving cars with little regard for pedestrians. While Rockside itself does have sidewalks, many of the public and private roads in the planning area do not. This basic lack of infrastructure inhibits walking, even for short, internal trips. With future development, redevelopment or road improvements, pedestrian infrastructure should be emphasized. Initiatives to improve the overall connectivity of the sidewalk network, create highly visible crossings, and reduce vehicle speeds in areas off of Rockside would greatly improve the comfort of pedestrians.

7. **Link the corridor with a multi-use trail to the Towpath Trail by way of the Hemlock Trail to the south**

The proposed Hemlock Trail will connect Independence to the Towpath Trail along a 1.7 mile multi-use path (trailhead just east of Community Campus). A northern extension could be made into the Rockside area to further connect the community into Cuyahoga Valley National Park. There is very little perceived or real connection between Rockside and the National Park today. This could be greatly improved by a highly visible trailhead that provides a direct connection for cyclists and walkers into the park. The alignment of this path would need to be evaluated in the same manner as the Hemlock Trail, but could run through the east of the city on a dedicated trail or as a protected lane on Brecksville Road.
2. Continue to market key development sites

A number of small (less than 10 acre) strategic development sites still exist in the planning area. These should be marketed creatively to maximize their potential. The size and shape of these parcels would limit the ability of the city to undergo a master planning process comparable to the larger Development Priority Area site.

STRATEGIES

1. Work with Kent State College of Podiatric Medicine to develop a mixed-use project near its campus

The 27-acre Kent State College of Podiatric Medicine has a full-time enrollment of just over 400 students. The institution has expressed interest in developing a mixed-use project that provides amenities for students and office uses with retail, recreation, lodging, and other supportive uses. There are very few housing options for the students within Independence or in surrounding communities. One potential scenario would re-purpose the institution’s park area for the development of a mixed-use building and establish a shared public park space along Rockside Woods Boulevard. Current zoning would not permit this and would need to be amended in order to move forward with such a project. The housing options could be coupled with retail or restaurant uses to serve the college as well as surrounding offices.

2. Target sectors with a competitive advantage in Independence

The Economic Development Strategic Plan (2013) identified a list of sectors for which Independence has a competitive advantage. The recommendation of the plan was to target these sectors with future business recruiting efforts. While some businesses may see an advantage leasing space in an existing building or a newer planning area that may take shape in the Development Priority Area, others may require a setting like the individual parcels along Rockside Woods Boulevard North. The city has outlined these sectors on its Economic Development microsite and could expand its visibility through targeted regional and national marketing.

3. Develop a Rockside Brand marketing tool for developers and brokers

The branding process completed in 2015 could be further refined to include a planning area brand for Rockside Road. Similar to what other commercial districts in the region have demonstrated, a brand is an important marketing tool for brokers. Rockside already has a regional reputation as a premier office location, but there is an opportunity to craft a more refined message about the future direction of the corridor. These communication tools would identify the essence of the Rockside brand and give brokers a better story with which to sell the planning area to potential tenants or developers.

4. Consider a wider allowance of uses for sites with limited accessibility or considerable environmental constraints

For sites that have received little interest due to concerns over access, visibility, or environmental constraints, the city should consider a change in zoning or the creation of a new designation with a wider range of acceptable uses. The new or permitted uses should consider surrounding parcels and their current and future utilization. If reasonable, the city might consider a new or altered designation that would not preclude light manufacturing, laboratory research, medical facilities, or other uses currently prohibited under the standard office zone.

DROP-IN DEVELOPMENT

Sites labeled as “Drop-in” ready can accommodate immediate, conforming development within the parcel.
3. Consider rezoning the residential parcels along Brecksville Road north of Rockside Road

The parcels lining Brecksville Road currently include a mix of office, commercial, and residential uses. A zoning change in this area could result in a district with more consistent uses. This area also provides an opportunity for small businesses to possibly own property in the Rockside Road planning area. This would eliminate the need for spot zoning approvals and encourage development of the deeper lots east of the road.

**STRATEGIES**

1. **Consider rezoning of the parcels along Brecksville Road from Residential (U-1) to a Commercial (U-5, U-4) designation**
   
   It is recommended for the city to undertake a full review and revision of its development regulations. The goal of the process is to create a modern code allowing for greater diversity and intermixing of uses. During this process, consideration should be given to rezoning all parcels with frontage along Brecksville Road.

2. **Make physical improvements to the public realm to ensure consistency and connection to the rest of Rockside as the transition occurs**

   As development and redevelopment occurs in the western portions of the Rockside Road corridor it will do so in a form and character that promotes walkability, maintains high architectural standards, and screens parking from the street. When the Brecksville Road corridor transitions from residential to commercial, improvements should be made to the public realm that are consistent with the new Rockside Road model and increase connectivity for vehicles and pedestrians.

**CREATING OWNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES**

Rezoning Brecksville Road as a commercial corridor would create a greater opportunity for business owners to own and develop property within the Rockside planning area. This was a primary recommendation from the Economic Development Strategic Plan (2013) to reduce the footloose nature of area businesses.
4. Encourage redevelopment of aging office buildings to increase connectivity, promote walkability, and build a vertical mix of uses

The average multi-tenant office building in Rockside is over 25 years old. As these buildings age, rehabilitation could increase their longevity. However, when the older office buildings reach the end of their useful lives, redevelopment should meet the emerging demand for walkable, mixed-use office districts. These new buildings should be placed closer to the street, and mask surface or structured parking.

Redevelopment is rarely an easy undertaking and presents numerous challenges. The degree to which the city takes an active role in facilitating redevelopment will directly affect the timing and extent of its success. A strong municipal role in redevelopment is very common in larger cities and is a growing role for smaller suburban cities.

PRIORITIZING REDEVELOPMENT

When and where redevelopment may occur will largely be determined by building owners and the strength of the market. While there are many factors that determine when a building has reached the end of its useful capacity, age is a simple tool for predicting when and where redevelopment may occur first. In the above map, primary and secondary redevelopment planning areas have been identified based on the average age of buildings.
1. **Create clear development standards for areas within targeted redevelopment zones**

Key areas have been identified as having the potential for redevelopment. When this occurs, clear standards should be written into the existing development regulations that clarify the type of environment to be created. Standards would help the areas achieve a higher concentration of uses, with buildings and activities that improve character, add amenity value, and generate higher tax revenues.

The standards could further define the mix of commercial and office uses permitted within the planning area and encourage projects to create a well-designed, pedestrian environment connected to surrounding development. Some examples of typical standards include: permitted uses, commercial and office density or floor area ratio, building height, building orientation, open space requirements, obscuring surface parking lots and engagement of public streetscape. Public greenspace within the block structure is an important amenity.

2. **Develop a playbook for redevelopment**

To clarify the process of redevelopment, the city could prepare a “playbook” for redevelopment. This document would clearly outline the process for redevelopment under the new standards, provide a checklist of necessary tasks, offer best practices from around the region that fit the Independence model, and clearly articulate the expectations established by the development standards.
3. **Encourage office building rehabilitation and redevelopment through the use of incentive programs**

Programs that incentivize the rehabilitation or redevelopment of aging office sites should be explored and implemented along the corridor. The Economic Development Strategic Plan (2013) recommended the establishment of a Community Reinvestment Area (CRA) to provide property owners with a tax incentive for investing in real property improvements or redevelopment. The plan recommended the establishment of a non-profit Community Investment Corporation (CIC) to focus on land and building acquisition and development of public improvements to leverage private redevelopment in the area.

4. **Meet with area brokers to understand rehabilitation opportunities**

In order to enhance the competitiveness of the Rockside Road corridor, initial steps would focus on encouraging the rehabilitation of existing building stock and establishing some amenity value. To accomplish this task, the city’s Economic Development Director would engage with stakeholders by meeting with property owners, businesses, and real estate brokers to initiate discussions about appropriate buildings for rehabilitation, existing infill opportunities, and ways to enhance amenity value.

A suggested format for this engagement would include initiating meetings with brokers to gain insights on appropriate buildings and areas that would benefit from rehabilitation; and be followed by one-on-one meetings with individual area property owners and developers to gauge short-term interest in rehabilitation, infill, and amenity development. The key advantage communicated to property owners would be the potential for increasing the value of their properties through:

- Rehabilitation of buildings to a higher standard to generate higher rents and long-term value.
- Establishment of sites for higher-density infill development which, in turn, enhances the overall value of properties that otherwise contain a “sea” of under-utilized (and lower-value) parking lots.
- Public amenities and mixed-uses which help to re-establish and strengthen the market for Rockside Road as a business destination and therefore, increase asking rents and cash flow, translating into higher long-term asset value.

5. **Allow for the infill of parcels within existing development**

Allowing for a greater intensity or utilization of a parcel may incentivize property owners to reconsider non-productive spaces on their land. Surface parking lots consume an enormous percentage of the buildable area within the Rockside Road corridor. Allowing higher floor-area ratios within these parcels could create economic conditions where increasing the density of buildings makes sense. Further, by allowing for a vertical mix of uses, the property owner could increase his or her return from the building, while also improving the walkability of the site and surrounding properties. As infill development occurs, parking decks or structures may be necessary to accommodate the increased vehicular activity.

**STRATEGIES**

1. **Create standards to manage infill development of suburban office parks**

Infill standards should be incorporated into a comprehensive zoning code update. This could occur in one of several ways: incorporating infill standards or guidelines into the general development standards of the code; as part of a PUD process; as part of an overlay zoning approach; or as part of new specialized districts. The key will be to establish standards that mitigate potential negative impacts related to intensification, such as traffic impact, infrastructure capacity, and loss of parking, while achieving the positive benefits of increased activity and synergy.
6. Create park and gathering space opportunities in the area

The corridor has no public parks, open spaces, or gathering spaces. A suitable location should be identified in each quadrant to accept a future opportunity. Ideally, these spaces would be centrally located within the area, and connected to existing development by sidewalks.

STRATEGIES

1. **Identify suitable locations for small park and gathering spaces in each portion of the corridor**

   The lack of public park and open spaces in the planning area negatively affects the image of the corridor and its amenity value for workers. While a majority of the available land has been developed, small opportunity areas exist where land is less suitable for development. These sites should be identified and explored as possible locations for small-scale public parks, and/or gathering spaces.

2. **Foster partnerships between the public and private actors in the planning area with the purpose of developing park space**

   In communities with a deficit of park space, creative partnerships between public and private actors can open up new opportunities. Building owners benefit from an amenity for their workers, making their properties more valuable. The city improves its park space per capita and the marketability of its business district overall.

3. **Explore the feasibility of a walking trail along the creek ravine within the planning area**

   The deep ravine cutting through the Development Priority Area of the Rockside planning area offers an attractive natural setting for a future walking path. The slope along the ravine makes the property prohibitive for large-scale development. A path connecting the offices along Patriots Way could tie into future development in the Development Priority Area. Similarly, there is a large area of undeveloped natural land in the northeast quadrant west of Brecksville Road and east of Rockside Woods Boulevard.
A walking trail could connect existing commercial
development in the far south with office
development along Rockside Woods Boulevard.
Ultimately, the trails could connect along
Brecksville Road into the Cloverleaf planning area
and on to the West Creek Confluence park areas.

4. **Explore the feasibility of a small park space in the southwest quadrant**
The large wetland areas east of the Acorn Drive
cul-de-sac are prohibitive to development. The
area could be maintained in its natural state and
converted into a small park space, serving the
office workers in the area and connecting the
neighborhoods to the south via a walking trail.

5. **Activate area park spaces with programs organized through the Chamber**
New park spaces within the corridor could be
activated or energized through programming
developed by the Chamber. The programming
would be aimed at area businesses and their
employees to provide networking and stress
relief opportunities throughout the year. Similar
programs around the region have established
regular activities such as brown bag lunches, first
Friday concerts, food truck rallies, lecture series,
and other events.
7. Improve the overall aesthetics of the corridor

The identity and aesthetics of the Rockside planning area could be improved through strategic initiatives that strengthen the visual quality of the public realm.

STRATEGIES

1. Increase the number and regularity of tree plantings along Rockside Road and other major thoroughfares including Rockside Woods Boulevard, West Creek Road, and Oak Tree Boulevard

   An initiative to improve the number and regularity of street trees lining major thoroughfares within the planning area would greatly enhance the aesthetics of the area as a whole. The city has been a member of the Tree City, USA organization since 2002 and has won several awards from the Arbor Day Foundation. This positive reputation could be leveraged to access grant funding at the regional, state, and federal level for a larger tree planting initiative focused on the Rockside Road corridor. Street trees help to improve the pedestrian experience, reduce heat island effect of large paved areas, and improve the performance of the stormwater system through the retention of rainwater.

2. Create gateway features at major entrances into the planning area, including along Brecksville Road, Rockside Road, and from the exits of I-77

   There are number of prominent entrances into Rockside from the east and west (along Rockside Road), from the north and south (along Brecksville Road), and from the exits off of I-77. There is an opportunity to develop branded gateway signage for each of these six locations that delineate the borders of Rockside. There are number of styles for gateways that range from roadway arches to standing signs.

3. Develop a public art initiative for the corridor

   An increasing emphasis has been placed on the importance of art in public places and its connection to community pride. There are several strategic locations within the Rockside Road corridor that would offer good exposure for quality pieces of public art. Potential artwork produced through this program would create a more dynamic corridor and add visual interest.

4. Establish and enforce consistent architectural and design standards for the corridor

   The Architectural Board of Review could establish clear expectations for design and building materials across the corridor to develop and enforce a consistent identity. The regulations would emphasize quality materials, thoughtful and consistent design, and the incorporation of unique, character enhancing elements.
8. Facilitate development of the parcels in the Development Priority Area with a competitive product that maximizes the area’s potential

The northwest quadrant of the planning area contains approximately 70 acres of undeveloped land. This constitutes one of the largest amounts of developable land in the planning area. In 2014, Independence purchased two parcels within the area comprising approximately 33 acres. A conceptual development framework has been developed for this area and the surrounding parcels. This concept includes a potential development yield for the area and aligns with the emerging market for walkable, mixed-use employment centers.

DEVELOPMENT INTENT

1. Develop into a dense, mixed-use district with residential opportunities
   The development pattern for Rockside will integrate uses into a walkable framework that creates a live, work, and play (24-hour) district.

2. Implement a transportation framework to improve connectivity
   The future street framework will seek to improve connectivity. New connections will support on-street parking and create a safe, pleasurable experience for pedestrians.

3. Create a 24-hour district with a myriad of amenities for workers and residents
   The Development Priority Area will be a destination for workers and residents alike. The district will include amenities such as restaurants, retail, and entertainment, along with residential options.

4. Dedicate green space for active and passive recreation and connect to existing natural areas
   Green and open spaces will be a priority for future projects located within the Development Priority Area. These new spaces will connect to existing natural areas within the Rockside Road corridor.

5. Offer flexibility to accept a drop-in corporate headquarters campus
   The new development pattern will not preclude the incorporation of a large corporate “drop-in” development. Recent regional examples prove this pattern is a more competitive model for such large-scale users.
Conceptual Development Framework
THE FUTURE OF ROCKSIDE

The diagram to the left illustrates one concept for the future development of Development Priority Area. This long-term scenario breaks the area into multiple new blocks, connected by existing and proposed streets. Each block has been assigned a development character type. These character types are places in the built environment that share similar characteristics in their function and form. In a character area, the scale of buildings and the sizes of lots are similar. The relationship of buildings to each other and to the streets, along with the pattern of the streets themselves are consistent. The future character areas for northwest Rockside will be explored in further detail, but include the following below.

MIXED-USE EMPLOYMENT CENTER
Mixed-use with retail or small office on the ground floor; office on upper floors

MIXED-DENSITY RESIDENTIAL
Mix of residential options at higher densities

PARKS AND OPEN SPACE
Dedicated space for active and passive recreation. Primarily public spaces but may be maintained by private and/or non-profit entities.

DEVELOPMENT YIELD

Based on current market demand, the Development Priority Area build-out will most likely occur in several phases. The concept yield includes:

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<tr>
<th>TYPE</th>
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<td>5</td>
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~75 acres
TOTAL SIZE OF THE NORTHWEST ROCKSIDE PLANNING AREA

1.4-1.6 mil. sq ft
FULL BUILD-OUT YIELD OF THE MIXED-USE EMPLOYMENT CENTER

20
NEW CITY BLOCKS CREATED THROUGH A STRUCTURED STREET PATTERN

164-265,000 sq ft

10 min
AVERAGE TIME TO DOWNTOWN CLEVELAND

15 min
AVERAGE TIME TO CLEVELAND HOPKINS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

30 min
AVERAGE TIME TO DOWNTOWN AKRON

Vertical Mixture of Uses
Providing a combination of different uses within the same building. Lower floors being directed towards public use while private uses exist on the upper portions of the building.
MIXED-USE EMPLOYMENT CENTER

The Mixed-Use Employment Center character type is an office district that incorporates supporting retail, restaurant, and entertainment uses within a compact and walkable street pattern. The district integrates those uses into vertically mixed-use buildings with outwardly-focused commercial uses at the street level with private offices above. The street pattern within this character type follow a grid pattern that has short, walkable blocks. On-street parking and well-appointed sidewalks improve the pedestrian experience between buildings. The large parking requirements generated by the activity of the district are handled in surface and structured lots hidden behind buildings. Open spaces are integrated throughout the district as block-sized passive parks, linear walking parks, and well-landscaped boulevards.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Office district with an integration of supporting services
- Vertically mixed-use with retail or small office on the ground floor; office on the upper floor
- Small blocks with a streetscape designed to encourage pedestrian activity
- Parking is on-street or masked from the street in surface or structured lots
MIXED-DENSITY RESIDENTIAL

The Mixed-Density Residential character type is an area reserved for varying densities of housing in close proximity to the Mixed-Use Employment Center. Housing types include townhouses or larger multi-unit buildings organized around a grid street pattern. The district is walkable to the supporting retail, restaurant, and entertainment uses provided within the Mixed-Use Employment Center and maintains its own shared open and park spaces. Housing units will be accessible from the street with parking structures or garages placed behind the buildings. An emphasis is placed on street design with high quality street furniture (including lighting, benches, etc), wide sidewalks, street trees, landscaping, and on-street parking throughout.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Residential district with a mix of residential buildings and townhouses built within a walkable proximity to the retail, restaurant, and entertainment uses
- Garages and parking in the rear of buildings, not visible from the right-of-way
- Building setbacks are minimized to engage the streetscape
- Similar architectural details and guidelines promote building unity
A LONG-TERM APPROACH

It is clear that the full realization of the vision for the Development Priority Area of Rockside will take place over several years. The scale of the project and the realities of the short-term (five year) market will most likely involve a phased approach to development.

A phased development approach relies heavily on strong development regulations which, through the zoning code, enforce a development pattern that matches the vision for the northwest quadrant of Rockside Road. This gradual development approach allows multiple developers to invest in the planning area and diversify its stakeholders.

It is important to stress that the phased approach to development would not preclude the incorporation of a large, drop-in corporate headquarters. On the contrary, the city’s economic development team could market the site’s vision as an incentive for such a relocation.

It is logical to assume that the parcels with consolidated ownership may be the first to be developed. This includes the city’s 33-acre holding at the center of the Development Priority Area. The new organization of uses will inevitably attract internal migration of office users. Rather than de-incentivize this movement, the city could leverage the action and provide evidence to existing property owners. This may motivate rehabilitation or redevelopment processes consistent with the corridor-wide recommendations.
DEVELOPING A MARKET APPROACH FOR THE DEVELOPMENT PRIORITY AREA

Marketing and strategic positioning will play an important role in the success of the Development Priority Area. The following recommendations and strategies relate specifically to this project and how it can be best positioned to take advantage of regional market realities while remaining true to the project’s vision.

The 70+ acre site is programmed to build out with 4.6 million square feet of “mixed-use employment space” plus hundreds of residential development units, internal open space, and sufficient room to accommodate a large corporate “drop in” employment-generating use. The plan is conceptualized with buildings built to the edge of blocks in a grid, which helps distribute traffic and creates a walkable “urban” mixed-use environment. The city has taken a major step forward in visioning the potential development of this site as a mixed-use business center that provides a modern product appealing to businesses and residents alike. As a green field site, the Development Priority Area offers opportunities for diversifying the city’s product mix and offering what cannot be easily or quickly achieved elsewhere.

MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

A central component of the area’s success will depend on the development of a strong brand and identity. The Market Analysis suggests that Independence could capture innovation uses to fill 140,000 to 190,000 square feet. A strategy to capture this demand would be to brand and market the Innovation Zone. Independence offers particular marketing strengths for attracting engineering-related services: aerospace, civil engineering, computer hardware, environmental; as well as information technology and business process outsourcing.

CONCEPTUAL BUSINESS MIX

Based on the findings of the Market Analysis, it was recommended that marketing and recruitment for the Innovation Zone focus on a mix of information technology (IT/IS), business process outsourcing, engineering-related services, and high-value product assembly for distribution.

STRATEGY

2. Establish locations or a general approach to accept a large, corporate “drop in” development

It was also recommended that sites be established to accommodate “drop in” uses including relocations within the region and State-generated leads. The proposed concept plan has accommodated this opportunity. While it can take many years to capture a large “drop in” use, Independence will remain competitive if it has a “shovel-ready” site in a high-quality mixed-use park environment to accommodate such uses.
RECRUITING ANCHOR USES

Having a large green field site without services does not provide Independence with much of a “leg up” on the competition for business recruitment. Certainly, having serviced, “shovel ready” sites in an attractive environment with excellent access to the interstate system (without traffic congestion) will provide a major marketing benefit.

STRATEGY

3. Recruit an “anchor” user

To leverage the market and initiate marketing efforts, it is highly recommended that the city work on recruiting an anchor use that would strengthen the Innovation Zone brand, making it more than just words on a plan. In other words, the city should recruit a name or use that is synonymous with innovation.

MANAGEMENT

Initially, marketing and planning for the Innovation Zone would be managed by the city’s Economic Development Director. The city could issue an RFP for a master developer, who would submit plans that must be consistent with the sub-area planning principles and marketing recommendations outlined in this sub-area plan.

STRATEGY

4. The city should develop and offer a package of targeted incentives for locating in the zone, with such incentives tied closely to the production of high-paying jobs in key sectors

Management of the zone might be organized under the auspices of a public development authority appointed by the City of Independence to guide the zone’s development. The authority would be established with a “sunset clause” that ensures it ceases to exist once the site is mostly (80-90%) developed. However, a strong development management agreement with a master developer could achieve the same aims without requiring the establishment of government oversight. The city must determine whether there is sufficient oversight to ensure that the site is developed in a way that is wholly consistent with the city’s intentions of maximizing the number of high-paying jobs.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND FINANCING

The sub-area plan appears to require the establishment of a roadway grid, along with the associated stormwater and streetscape design elements. The site would also require water and sewer extension.

STRATEGIES

5. Work in partnership with the master developer to finance basic infrastructure improvements such as roads, water/sewer and streetscaping

6. Employ tax increment financing (TIF) to finance key bulk infrastructure projects

Projects such as extending water/sewer mains and building roads could be financed by the city using the TIF mechanism. These efforts could then be used to leverage private development investment. Unlike green field residential projects, it is in the city’s interest to use such methods of leverage to secure long-term, job-rich private development in a premier location like the Innovation Zone.

7. Implement a fiber strategy that will guarantee sufficient bandwidth to support the marketing of the site for intensive BPO, IT and other communication service users

If the site is to be marketed for technology uses, including advanced manufacturing capabilities, then there will be a need to ensure capacity for high-volume communication networks.
To finance any upgrading or extension of fiber, the city might enter into contract agreements with suppliers that would be interested in entering the market.

8. **Establish an “open innovation platform” along with IT support services at this site as a service to companies that wish to locate there**
   
   Open platforms allow for the sharing of innovations and testing of products online with public support. Housing a platform at the Innovation Zone and providing IT/IS support services would provide a marketing advantage for the zone. Such services might be provided initially through the city, which could eventually spin-off the service within the zone. Innovation platforms would be developed at nominal expense through the city’s Economic Development division.

   The IT infrastructure might also allow for logistics support, such as a monitoring system or networking capabilities that could be shared by companies located within the zone. Such networks could save companies on overhead costs for developing their own systems.

9. **Incorporate support services such as retail, restaurants, and public spaces**
   
   While not “infrastructure,” per se, the site would need to accommodate amenities including siteserving retail, restaurants and public spaces. These uses have been indicated in the sub-area plan as conceptualized.

**INCENTIVES**

The “package” of incentives offered in the Innovation Zone should be as strong and targeted as possible. As noted earlier, it is not in the city’s best interest to create directly competitive incentive programs that would cause or encourage relocations from Seven Hills or other neighboring communities into Independence. Rather, incentives should be oriented first towards attracting the anchor uses noted previously. Some of those uses, such as institutions or government offices (with spin-off contractors) may not require financial incentives but would benefit from partnerships with appropriate agencies at state and federal government levels.

Technology-oriented and advanced manufacturing uses would benefit from the site’s location and infrastructure as proposed above, but tax and financial incentives would help “seal the deal.” Among the incentives, as mentioned earlier, are accelerated depreciation on real estate (for developers or companies that construct build-to-suit, owner-occupied buildings) and on technology equipment and laboratory uses.

**STRATEGY**

10. **Establish low-interest loan programs**
   
   Low-interest loan programs could be established to help finance laboratory equipment and/or to seed a venture capital fund for businesses located in Independence. The city should include in the package programs associated with Innovation Fund of Northeast Ohio, which offers pre-seed funding for technology-based start-ups and entrepreneurs. The city’s own VC-type fund could be used to “top-up” or complement the regional program.
ADDRESSING DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS

Development regulations or zoning are the legal framework around which a city is built. These rules and regulations vary in complexity, allowances, and legibility from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. This variability means that the approach to development is rarely a straightforward process. In the case of the City of Independence, the current code precludes the construction of the Development Priority Area as it is defined by the community’s vision.

The mixing of uses and incorporation of mixed density housing do not have a precedent within the city and therefore are not classifications within the code. In conjunction with the Area Planning process, a review of the city’s development regulations was conducted. This study had three goals:

1. Provide a comprehensive understanding of the city’s regulations, and how they are enforced;
2. Understand the limitations of the current code, and;
3. Recommend methods for amending the code to help realize the community’s vision and ensure Independence maintains its fiscal security.

These recommendations would pay special attention to the specific development projects proposed for Northwest Rockside and Downtown.

The following findings and recommendations relate to the Northwest Rockside Planning area. More general recommendations have been included throughout the area plans and within the appendix.

11. Institute a freestanding Planned Unit Development ordinance

The city can prepare a separate freestanding planned unit development ordinance that allows for alternative forms of development in accordance with the plan. This would allow for the rezoning of property as a PUD on a case by case basis. With an older zoning code with many incremental updates over the years, there is the potential for internal inconsistencies in applying the current code to new development types. With a comprehensive code update, overall development standards related to landscaping, resource protection, parking design, pedestrian orientation, and others could be relied on to supplement a PUD. Without a comprehensive code update, each PUD would have to carry the full weight of regulating all aspects of the development.

12. Initiate a process to perform a comprehensive code update

A long-term approach is to update the overall zoning code to modernize it and incorporate the policies recommended in the plan. The current zoning code is out of date and in need of updating. There is very little in the existing code that would advance the plan recommendations; in fact, existing code provisions could actually conflict with plan recommendations. (For example, the subdivision regulations have “planning criteria” that may actually be counter to the plan recommendations, such as encouraging cul-de-sacs.)

As part of a comprehensive update, the city should develop standards that accomplish the characteristics of mixed use development described above. It should also establish clear, fair, and predictable procedures for both the development community and the Independence community at large. It should achieve a balance of discretionary and non-discretionary review and standards that allows for a mix of flexibility and predictability that works for Independence.

There are many tools that can be incorporated into an overall code update to accomplish the plan. These include:

- Improved development standards that apply across the board such as: site design standards; landscaping requirements; parking lot design standards; signage standards; lighting standards; building form and orientation requirements; intensity standards; and resource protection standards.
 Planned unit developments regulations with clear guidance to supplement the general development standards.

 Overlay districts that provide supplemental regulations in addition to underlying zoning districts.

 New separate special purpose districts, such as a new "downtown mixed use" or "Rockside mixed use" with customized standards for those specific areas only.

This is the preferred alternative. It would result in a comprehensive approach to integrating the area plans into the city’s development regulations. It would also provide the benefit for updated land use regulations for the city overall, which are needed.

13. Increase the development review staff capacity to ensure compliance

Just as the zoning regulations need to be updated and modernized, the way in which the city goes about reviewing development should be assessed. The way in which the city has reviewed development proposals in the past may have served the city well for that chapter of its history, but it is highly unusual for a community with the quality and aspirations of Independence to not have active professional planning advice in its regular board and commission process.

As part of implementation of this plan, the city should be prepared to expand the professional planning and design capacity that serves the city’s boards and commissions. The policies of the plan will require an increase in planning and design sophistication in the development review process, requiring increased professional review and participation in the development review process.

Likewise, the planning commission, the ARB, and city council will require training and education on the new concepts in the plan and any new development regulations.

SUCCESSFUL ELEMENTS OF MIXED USE ZONING

With the introduction of mixed use options in the Rockside Road Planning Area comes a need to establish the parameters for requirements that should ultimately be incorporated into the city’s zoning and development standards. As the city considers updates to its land use regulations, the following are characteristics of successful mixed use development that should be translated into land use regulations that fit the City of Independence. Mixed use development should embody the following:

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<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMPLEMENT USES</td>
<td>Allow for a complementary mix of land uses that support each other, offer opportunities for multiple purpose trips, and create an environment where high quality investment is enabled.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRITICAL MASS</td>
<td>Include densities and intensities that are high enough to create a critical mass of economic viability while also being compatible with surrounding areas, especially any adjacent residential neighborhoods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FORM</td>
<td>Have buildings oriented to streets rather than parking lots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTEXT</td>
<td>Be compatible with any historic or traditional context (most applicable in the Downtown area).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONNECTIVITY</td>
<td>Promote both internal and external vehicular and pedestrian connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEHICULAR TRAFFIC</td>
<td>Accommodate automobile traffic and parking in a safe and efficient manner, but not allow parking or vehicular areas to dominate the design of the site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC SPACES</td>
<td>Include publicly accessible spaces and amenities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIVIC USES</td>
<td>Promote compatible civic uses, such as public buildings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCALE</td>
<td>Include human scaled building design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATURAL RESOURCES</td>
<td>Conserve and integrate environmentally sensitive resources into the design of the development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STREET FRONTAGE</td>
<td>Establish active street frontages with high quality streetscape design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24/7</td>
<td>Promote round the clock safety through the presence of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOUSING CHOICE</td>
<td>Provide a variety of housing choices for evolving demographics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Work with Seven Hills to develop mutually beneficial development program along Rockside Road

The City of Seven Hills worked in collaboration with Independence to develop its own area plan for several of its largest undeveloped parcels along Rockside Road. The final development program will help improve the overall competitiveness of the Rockside corridor, rather than directly compete with plans within Independence. In the long-term, the two cities should identify and pursue opportunities for collaboration.

STRATEGIES

1. Develop a framework with Seven Hills to work collaboratively along the Rockside Road corridor

As progress is made in the Development Priority Area, a working relationship should exist with the City of Seven Hills to capitalize on market demands for both commercial and residential opportunities. Both communities should look to incorporate corridor wide incentives to attract business opportunities. This type of approach will stand to benefit both municipalities, as opposed to negotiating independently.

2. Develop a corridor-wide marketing and management entity

It is recommended that the City of Independence and the City of Seven Hills collaborate on marketing, management and infrastructure financing within the Rockside Road Corridor. By doing so, both jurisdictions stand to gain from the broader market penetration and economies of scale that could be achieved for the corridor. The management component of such an entity might relate to the coordination of agreements between the two communities as well as oversight of specific management issues that may impact the corridor as a whole.

The entity could be established under a JEDD or other mechanism to be determined jointly by the two cities. Regardless of the specific mechanism, a collaborative approach will benefit both communities. Ultimately, most office use will be concentrated in the Independence portion of the Corridor, but joint marketing approaches (aside from each community’s individual company recruitment efforts) will benefit both communities by raising the overall profile of the corridor.

Seven Hills Development Intent

1. Improve connectivity for pedestrian and vehicular traffic
2. Create a special place to serve the community
3. Provide a mixture of well-integrated uses
4. Develop an approach to the redevelopment of aging office buildings, specifically on Lombardo Center
5. Improve the overall aesthetics of the corridor
6. Take a long term view

A pedestrian oriented streetscape is being proposed in the Seven Hills development with uses mixed both horizontally and vertically.
DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT

Through public engagement and the work of the Seven Hills Planning Committee, a development concept was created for the largest undeveloped area left in the community. The city hopes to capitalise on the regional demand for commercial space and provide a unique set of residential options which currently does not exist in the area.

Providing a central gathering space that the city currently lacks was a major feature in the development area as well as creating a face for the City of Seven Hills along the Rockside Road corridor. The plan includes a mix of housing, offices, and retail. These uses would be complimented by several large and prominent greenspaces, including a central park adjacent to Rockside Road.

The high level recommendations provide a path for the City of Seven Hills to achieve its goals and work in collaboration with its neighbor, Independence. The plan aims to create complimentary nodes of development that improve the overall health of the corridor in the future and benefit each community fiscally.

“This shared effort will open obvious benefits for both communities along the Rockside corridor so critical for both of our futures.”

Seven Hills Mayor Richard Dell’Aquila