



STRONG TOWNS BLONO

Front N Center Design Charrette Proposal

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Prepared by:



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A Note about This Project

The design charrette organizing team wants readers to understand that the recommendations put forth in this document are the result of a volunteer-driven process and **NOT** a directive from city staff, council, or any other officials. Therefore, all plans described are simply proposals meant to lead to meaningful conversations about the future of downtown's development. If the city or any developer would like to implement any of these designs, we would be delighted to allow them!

The three proposed designs are meant not to be taken as indivisible projects. Parcels on the west side of Madison Street can be implemented independently of the parcels on the east side.

As this was a volunteer project, no money exchanged hands for professional services. All site plans, renderings, and layout design were completed pro bono. Cost estimates and architectural renderings are meant to provide a general sense of scale for these projects, but not to be taken literally. For developers interested in these projects, make sure to conduct due diligence when completing pro formas.

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What is Strong Towns Blono?

Strong Towns Blono is a 501(c)(3) non-profit and a Local Conversation of the Strong Towns movement. We work to foster a vibrant, safe, economically and environmentally sustainable, and livable community through advocacy, grassroots action, and building social capital. We achieve our mission through the Strong Towns Approach:

1. Humbly observe where people in the community struggle.
2. Ask the question: What is the next smallest thing we can do right now to address that struggle?
3. Do that thing. Do it right now.
4. Repeat.

This mantra of “small bets” is really within the hands of regular people like you and me. We do not have to wait around for other people to make changes.

The Urban Centers Revitalization Committee has worked to develop alternative visions for our downtown through the charrette process outlined in this document. Given the demolition of historic buildings over two downtown blocks, we wanted to ensure that surface parking lots do not permanently replace our city’s history at strategic sites in our urban core. Strong Towns emphasizes the strength of the historic urban fabric, the places and structures that generate tax revenue for our community, add character to the streetscape, and allow for wealth creation of residents.

We decided to complete a visioning charrette as an exercise in good urbanist principles. Our goal was to build

relationships between activists and practitioners, while laying out a positive vision for the future.

Follow us on social media, join our Facebook group, and subscribe to our monthly newsletter. Please join Strong Towns Blono as a member today!

	Amount
One-time membership fee (due upon joining the organization)	\$10
Annual dues without service hours	\$20
Annual dues with at least 5 service hours	\$10
Annual dues with at least 10 service hours	\$0

Cheers,



Noah Tang

President

Strong Towns Blono



Existing Conditions

The Front N Center building and the adjacent DUI Countermeasures building, as well as the former Elks building across Madison Street, are being demolished after decades of mismanagement and neglect.

Once home to department stores, an early auto dealership, shops, bars, offices, fraternal halls, and other uses, these parcels fell on hard times as downtown hollowed out in the face of auto-oriented commercial development especially on the East Side.

During 2024 and 2025, city officials persuaded the building owners to sign over the properties in exchange for forgiveness of delinquent property tax payments. This gave the city a freer hand in guiding these parcels' futures.

Studies revealed that buildings had deteriorated beyond the point where restoration was feasible. The city staff instead suggested razing the buildings to make way for 140 new surface parking spots. This would compensate for the demolition of the Market Street Parking Deck, which has reached the end of its lifespan.

The city hopes that the use for parking will prove temporary. A permanent surface parking lot on the same block as the landmark People's Bank Building just southwest of the Museum Square would be a setback for downtown revitalization. The city manager has suggested that parking is indeed not the final goal for the parcels. That is why our organization decided to go through the design charrette process to envision better uses for these lots.

RIGHT: Visioning group walks past the empty shell of the Front N Center Building in summer of 2025.



Overview

The purpose of this exercise was to identify alternatives to the current state of development on two highly visible but troubled blocks in Downtown Bloomington. A charrette is a collaborative process in which stakeholders, community members, designers, and architects brainstorm design.

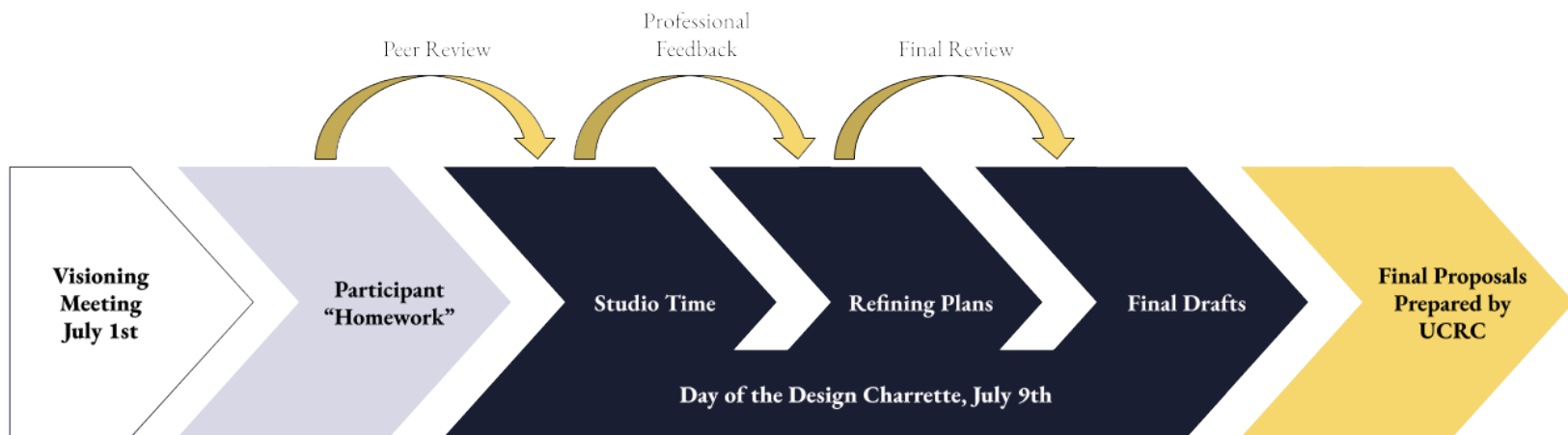
The charrette focused on the lots of Front N Center and its vicinity would propose plausible alternatives to consigning these spaces to parking lot. Though the Urban Centers Revitalization Committee of Strong Towns Blono ran the exercise, a variety of community volunteers participated.

Process

From start to finish, the charrette entailed planning and preparation that spanned several months. Community volunteers participated in a visioning meeting on July 1, 2025 and then in the actual charrette exercise on July 9.

The chart below sketches how the charrette process was organized. Volunteers brought sketches and ideas to share with their groups.

By the end of the charrette day, each group completed a final draft of a site plan, three sketches, and a summary of the project.



Visioning Meeting

On July 1, 2025, a group of Strong Towns members, downtown stakeholders, real estate development practitioners, and city staff met at the Bloomington Public Library to discuss their visions for these lots.

After reviewing Strong Towns principles and touring the sites, charrette participants worked together to build a shared vision of the project. This shared vision guided the sketched designs that participants would bring to the actual day of the design charrette.

Shared Vision

- Productive from a tax-rolls perspective
- Majority local ownership/owner-occupied
- Small parcels/mixed use
- Visually striking and inviting
- Many entrances along the street
- Some green space
- Noise reduction measures along Madison Street
- Style matches the rest of downtown
- Allowance for small bets
- Spaces for community and events
- Connected to the urban fabric



Low Intensity Group

Site plan sketch by Tyler Pessler



Participants

- Dakota Black, Team Lead
- Austin Black
- Zach Carlson
- Katherine McCarthy
- Anthony Crispin, UIUC School of Urban Planning

Program Summary

On the corner of Madison and Washington, there is a small parking lot with a mural wall and lighting. The parking lot is separated by an alley with trees and string lights attached with small pathways for pedestrians and inventory loading. On Front and Roosevelt, there is a pop-up vendor space surrounding a small, central green space. A centerpiece would be a sculpture by a local artist. The green space would also feature movable benches, tables, and chairs. Stalls are occupied by tents, shopping containers, and low-intensity retail space. At Front and Madison, there is a permanent farmer's market structure, trash receptacle, public restroom, and a green area for seating and dining. There is a small parking lot to the side.



ABOVE: Aerial view of the new Front N Center campus showing parking.

LEFT: Low Intensity design team during the charrette.

BELOW: Green area for seating and dining next to the public restrooms and market structure.





ABOVE: Pop-up retail space with tables and chairs in the center (public art not shown).

INSET: Alley of trees and string lights that separate the pop-up retail space and the parking lot to the north.

Benefits to the Surrounding Area and City

This scheme emphasizes one-story, low-intensity structures with trees, green space, seating, and public art. This arrangement will make the space feel open and welcoming. Such a welcoming space should draw people downtown for socializing, shopping and dining. Practical amenities such as a small parking lot, trash receptacles, and public bathroom will facilitate maintenance as well as use. String lighting will increase visibility and safety in the alley. The small-scale, low-rent retail spaces would require only modest investment but will allow for a permanent farmers market, micro-retail space, food trucks and workshops. These facilities would provide start-up businesses and small-scale entrepreneurs with affordable storefronts. This arrangement would also be visible and inviting to people attending events at the nearby coliseum.

Financial Viability

These cost estimates were conducted in consultation with professional local real estate developers. As for the viability of this option, the low-intensity group mostly focused on activating these parcels for the public realm. Compared to their use solely as municipal parking lots, this committee believes that opening this space to low-barrier entrepreneurial projects can and will improve the ecosystem of small businesses in the community. This would lead to increased sales tax revenues and eventual rise in property values and streetlife activation in the vicinity.

Front N Center Parcel	Butler & Elk's Lodge Lot
Market hall structure: \$250k - \$350k	Parking lot: \$375k - \$425k
Restrooms: \$150k - \$200k	Temporary structure tent: \$85k - \$150k
Parking lot: \$100k - \$125k ¹	Vendor booths (thirteen total): \$195k - \$260k
Landscaping : \$150k - \$200k	Electrical: \$150k - \$200k
General design fees: ~\$160k	
Total: \$1.6M - \$2M of public investment	

¹ Parking costs should not be included in these prices, as parking is what the city currently proposes.

Existing Conditions Property Taxes Billed 2024	City Proposal Property Taxes	Low Intensity Group Proposal
	All untaxed property to be municipal parking lots, nothing more than car storage.	About half of the untaxed city property here would house entrepreneur style retail that will generate sales tax revenue for the city, while also maintaining parking spaces.

Medium Intensity Group

Site plan sketch by Tyler Pessler



Participants

- Tyler Pessler, Team Lead
- Mark Adams, AICP
- Collen Zerebny
- Kelby Cumpston
- Brian Keith

Program Summary

This proposal contains a two-level restaurant attached to an outdoor seating area. To the west of it there are three-four story affordable housing units with a rooftop garden and an attached picnic/park area on the ground level. Residential parking is attached to the buildings. Across Madison, there is a dog park and skate park. To the north are picnic pavilions and green space, with an event tailgating lot. There is a pop-up tent spot along with space for food truck parking. In the center is a restroom shelter. To the east is a playground and a public wall/mural area.



ABOVE: Aerial view of the new Front N Center campus showing the restaurant and apartment building.

LEFT: Medium Intensity design team during the charrette.

BELOW: Bodega style grocery store for downtown on Center Street.





ABOVE: Biergarten and restaurant.

INSET: Apartment units with a rooftop deck and residential zen garden.





LEFT: Dog park for downtown across the street from the arena.

BELOW: Skate park and pavilion on the east side of the old Butler lot.



Benefits to the Surrounding Area and City

This proposal focuses on enhancing livability in Downtown Bloomington, but it still contains features to draw people downtown from elsewhere in Bloomington-Normal. A three-four story apartment building provides family-oriented amenities as well as practical services. Families would enjoy the building's dedicated parking, park, and rooftop garden. Residents could shop at the nearby bodega or small grocery store, use the dog park, skate park, and playground. These same amenities would also attract other area residents. A two-story restaurant and beer garden would enliven the site. While not as open as the low-intensity proposal, the scheme still includes public restrooms, public art (a mural wall), and green space, on top of food truck parking, and eating areas. The parking and tailgating area could also be used in coordination with arena events. The apartment building, restaurant, and small-scale retail would cost more than the low intensity proposal. Still the risk is spread out, and this plan has the potential to develop into a larger source of income for the city.



LEFT: Participants working to combine drafts sketches into one master sketch during the charrette.

Financial Viability

With the proposed return of the Front N Center parcel to private ownership, the city would resume collecting property taxes from these lots.¹ It is important to note that this project lies within the boundaries of the downtown Tax Increment Financing District, where property taxes on all improvements above the original assessed values of lots will be moved into the TIF fund for the next two decades. However, the whole point of TIF districts is to spur development.

Once the TIF expires, these proposed buildings would contribute to a healthy downtown district.



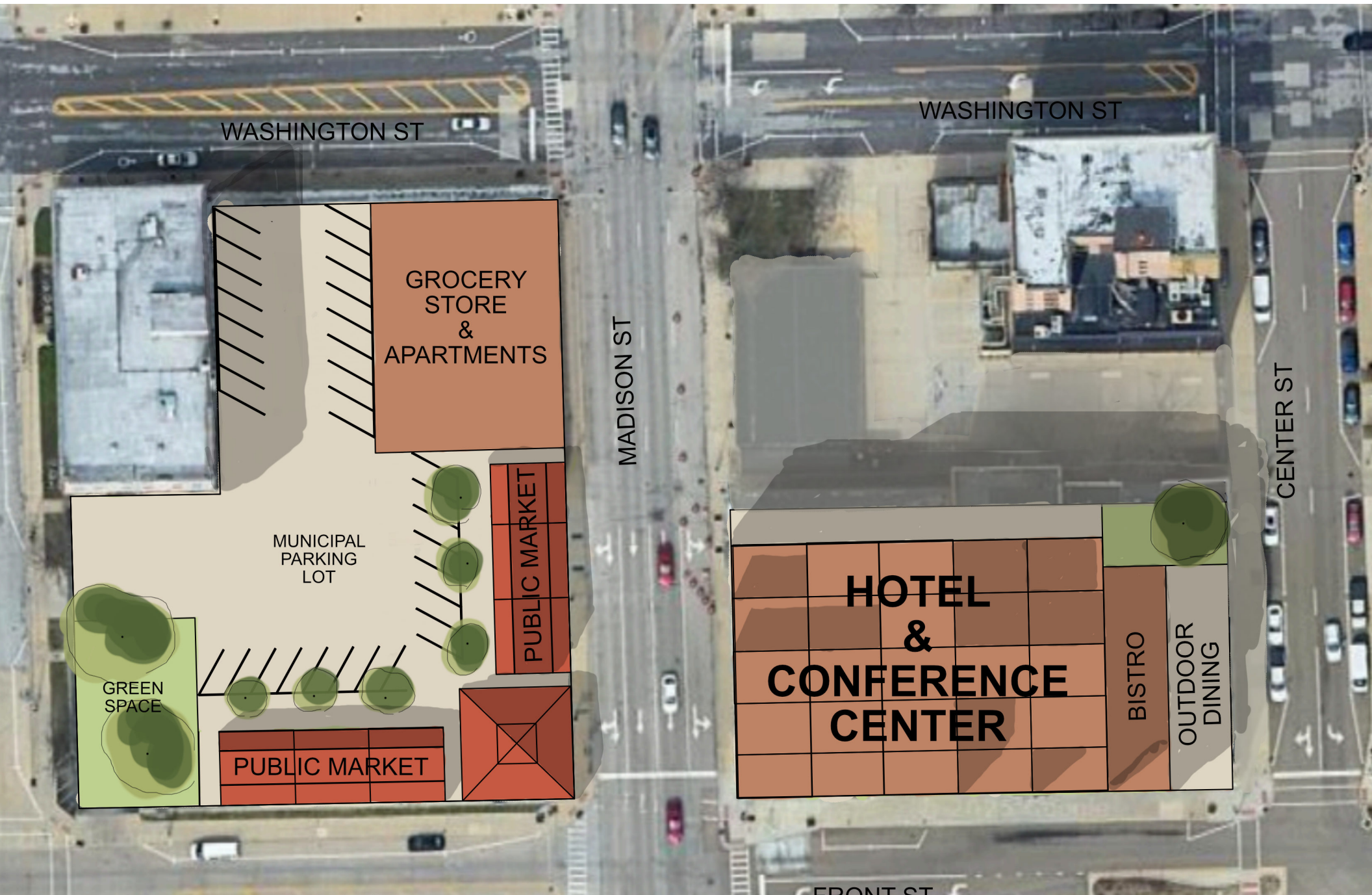
Front N Center Parcel	Butler & Elk's Lodge Lot
Corner restaurant at 2500 sq. ft: ~\$620k - \$1M	Skate park: \$450k
Apartment building at 7650 sq ft: ~\$1.9M - \$3.1M	Dog park: \$350k - 500k
Residential parking: \$70k - \$85k	Playground: \$350k - \$500k
	Public parking: \$80k - \$95k
General design fees: ~\$50k	
Total public investment: \$1.4M - \$1.8M	
Total private investment: \$2.8M - \$4.4M	
Total overall: \$4.5M - \$6.4M	

Existing Conditions Property Taxes Billed 2024	City Proposal Property Taxes	Medium Intensity Group Proposal
	All untaxed property to be municipal parking lots, nothing more than car storage.	All parcels in the Front N Center portion of the design will be returned to private usage, allowing for the collection of property taxes. Property tax numbers are projected estimates based on construction costs. TIF allocations not accounted for.

¹ We are assuming a private buyer for these lots for this property tax analysis.

High Intensity Group

Site plan sketch by Tyler Pessler



Participants

- Noah Tang, Team Lead
- Dawn Peters
- Joshua Maubach
- Samantha Mlot
- Hannah Horn

Program Summary

This proposal primarily contains a six-twelve story hotel and conference center with underground parking, first-level retail, first- and second-level conference space, and four-eight stories above for rooms. There is green space and outdoor dining attached. The alley would feature nicer seating or a pocket park. Across Madison, there is a grocery store with apartments above. Next to that are shipping container corridors of restaurants and retail. There is more green space around the corner, with a water retention pond to capture runoff.



ABOVE: The 80-100 room hotel where the former Front N Center was located.

LEFT: High Intensity design team during the charrette.

BELOW: Restaurant and bistro style seating on Center Street by the hotel.

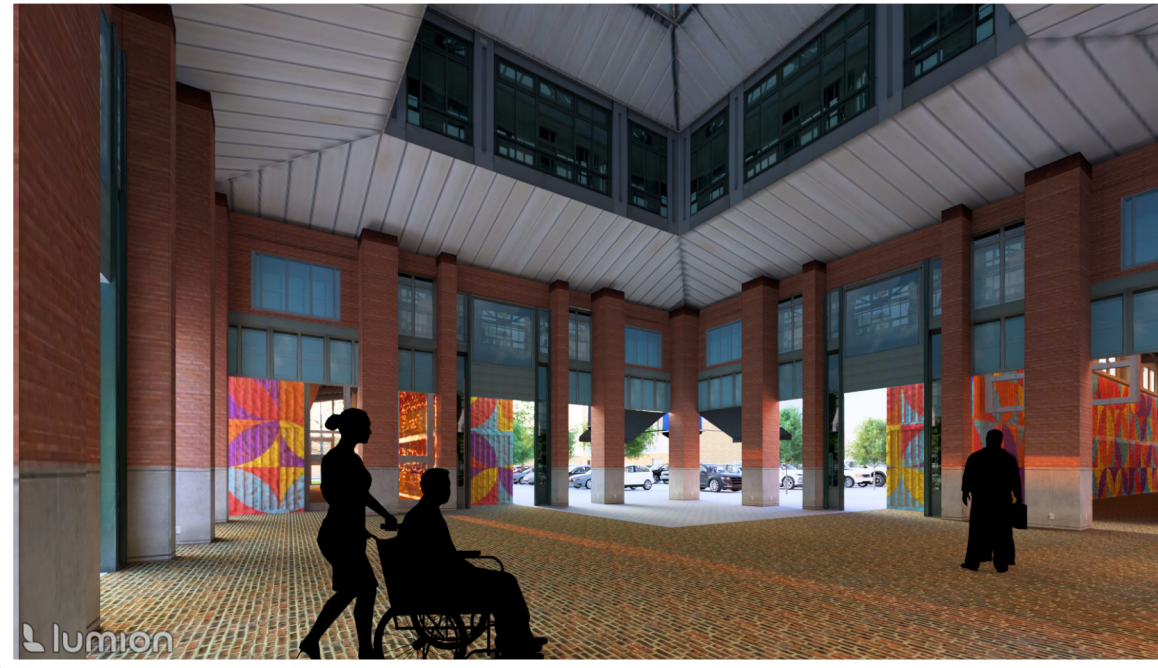




ABOVE: Corner of Madison and Front Streets looking west. Main entrance to the market hall with commissary kitchens.

BELOW: Urban grocery store with apartments above on the Washington Street entrance to the market campus.

INSET: Interior of the market hall, with space for gathering and eating (tables and booths not modeled).



Benefits to the Surrounding Area and City

The high intensity proposal includes a grocery store with apartments above, micro retail and restaurants housed in shipping containers, and a water retention pond to alleviate flooding during a storm and provide a small wildlife habitat. These features would support small-scale entrepreneurs, while attracting area residents. Unlike the other proposals, this plan focuses on non-residents, most obviously by featuring an art-deco-style hotel and conference center that covers the entire site where the four-story Front N Center building now stands. The hotel and conference center would require substantial investment for the underground parking, ground-floor retail, two stories of conference space and four-eight stories for 80-100 hotel rooms. The art deco design reflects the architectural style elsewhere in downtown and would visually enhance the block, as would the green space, outdoor dining and pocket park in the alley. If successful, the hotel could be a boon to downtown businesses and provide income to the city. It entails, however, substantial risk for one project.



Financial Viability

This development looks the most conventional; a multi-million dollar project designed to anchor the downtown region with a hotel and public market space. It does not follow the Strong Towns method of incremental development per se. Yet, since it was created by the high-intensity team at our charrette, we decided to include it in this proposal packet. Most of the location would be turned over to private developers, so sales and property taxes will be a boon for the city. Even with the public market being owned by the city, the potential sales and tourism revenue make this proposal worth discussion.

It is beyond the scope of this packet proposal to determine the capital stack and other information needed to implement this project. Regardless, the construction of a hotel with a conference center will allow more optimal usage of the arena and more leveraging of these combined resources toward the goal of revitalizing the downtown and core neighborhoods.



Front N Center Parcel	Butler & Elk's Lodge Lot
Hotel at 36,000 sq ft: ~\$9M - \$14.5M	Multistory mixed use grocery store and apartments at 12,483 sq feet: ~\$3.1M - \$5M
Underground parking structure: \$1.75M - \$2.5M	Public market: ~\$3.6M - \$5M
	Parking lot: \$200k - \$225k
General design fees: ~\$2M	
Total public investment: \$0	Total public investment: \$3.8M - \$5.2M
Total private investment: \$10.75M - \$15M	Total private investment: ~\$3.1M - \$5M
Total overall: \$18M - \$25M	

ABOVE: Parking lot of the market hall can double as an event space. Shipping containers have public art on them.

OPPOSITE: Aerial view of the campus from the arena.

Existing Conditions Property Taxes Billed 2024	City Proposal Property Taxes	High Intensity Group Proposal
	All untaxed property to be municipal parking lots, nothing more than car storage.	Property tax numbers are projected estimates based on construction costs. TIF allocations not accounted for.

Next Steps

This packet will be shared with city staff and the general public. We seek to turn this into a conversation piece about the pace and scale of redevelopment downtown. Once demolition of the existing building has been completed, Strong Towns Blono plans to hold community discussion sessions and conduct “pop-up urbanism” activities to build public support, while maintaining awareness among city officials, staff, the public, and potential developers.

BELOW: Charrette groups tour site.



Support for This Charrette from Bloomington Plans

Our design team looked over various plans drawn up for the City of Bloomington regarding redevelopment in its core regions to ensure that our charrette aligned with those plans. Below is a non-exhaustive list of goals from two plans pertaining to downtown revitalization:

Downtown Development Strategy, 2013. Farr Associates

- Goal 2.1: Pursue public-private partnership and assistance opportunities, (64).
- Goal 3: Business recruitment and retention activities, (65).
- Goal 5: Protect Downtown's historic character and encourage appropriate new development, (66).
- Goal 12: Reinforce the connections between Downtown and adjacent neighborhoods, (67).

City of Bloomington Comprehensive Plan, 2015.

- H-1. Ensure the availability of safe, attractive and high quality housing stock to meet the needs of all current and future residents of Bloomington, (61).
- H-2. Ensure reinvestment in the established older neighborhoods and compact development of the City, (66).
- ED-2. Foster a culture of entrepreneurship, (92).
- D-1. Continue to build a healthy Downtown that offers a range of employment, retail, housing, cultural and entertainment opportunities for all, (101).

Appendix

Low Intensity Parameters

A low intensity design for these lots will include mostly stick-frame construction, sheds, food truck hook-ups, and other temporary structures. It can utilize all or some of the current parking lot dimensions to the proposal, as most of the lot area should remain parking with the ability for temporary “festival markets.” The low intensity should be viewed as a possible intermediary for more intensive uses down the line, keep that in mind with the site plan.

Medium Intensity Parameters

A medium intensity design for these lots can include aspects of the low intensity project (stick-frame construction, sheds, food truck hook-ups, and other temporary structures) but also have more permanent buildings with housing and flexible spaces. More than half of the area should be reserved for building footprints.

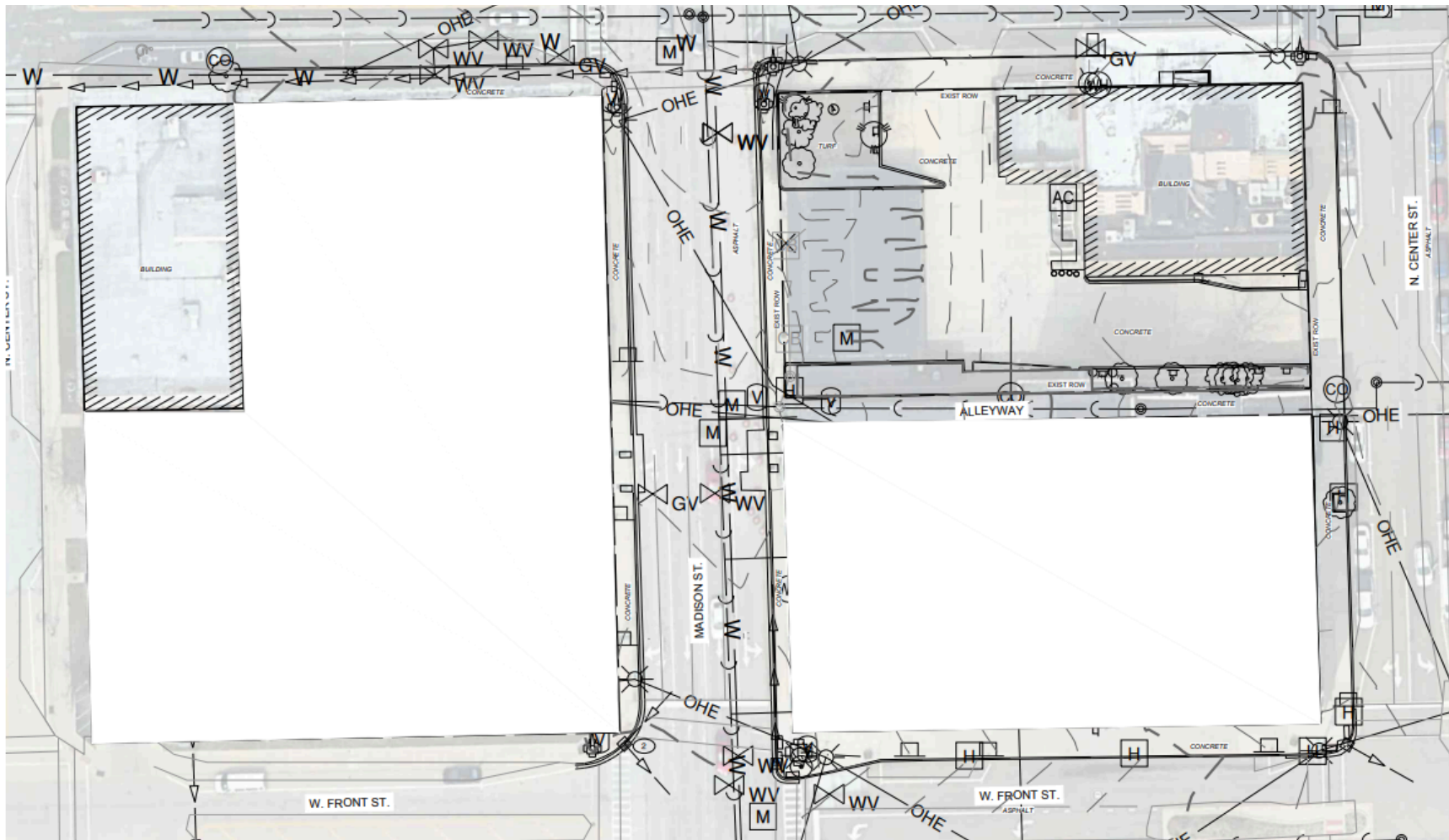
High Intensity Parameters

A high intensity design for these lots focuses on permanent buildings with housing and flexible spaces. Most of the area should be reserved for building footprints. At least half of the buildings should be designed to be owner-occupied. There still should be an area of shared space for people to gather.

	Low Intensity	Medium Intensity	High Intensity
Zoning	Uses & designs fit D-1 zoning framework	Uses & designs fit D-1 zoning framework	Uses & designs fit D-1 zoning framework
Occupancy	Mostly temporary entrepreneur leases and pop-ups, group can decide	Some temporary entrepreneur leases and pop-ups, owner-occupied units, and mixed uses	Some temporary entrepreneur leases and pop-ups, owner-occupied units, and mixed uses
Cost Awareness	Solutions should be visionary yet financially grounded, buildings should be small and affordable	Financially grounded, buildings should be simple	Financially grounded, buildings should be affordable for their size
Parking	Most of the site should remain nominally as a parking lot where the use can be transformed for events	Residential units might need to have corresponding off-street parking, utilize street parking and a small parking lot	Residential units might need to have corresponding off-street parking, utilize street parking
Massing	Attempt to “line the street” with some type of structure to mostly obscure the parking from pedestrians. Try not to build more than one story	Should “line the street” with structures to mostly obscure the parking from pedestrians. Individual buildings should be no wider than 25 feet facing the principal street. Multiple stories are recommended	“Line the street” with structures. Most individual buildings should be no wider than 25 feet facing the principal street. Multiple stories are recommended.

Charrette “Homework” Blank

All participants of the visioning meeting were given a charrette design guidebook and several copies of the blank map below.



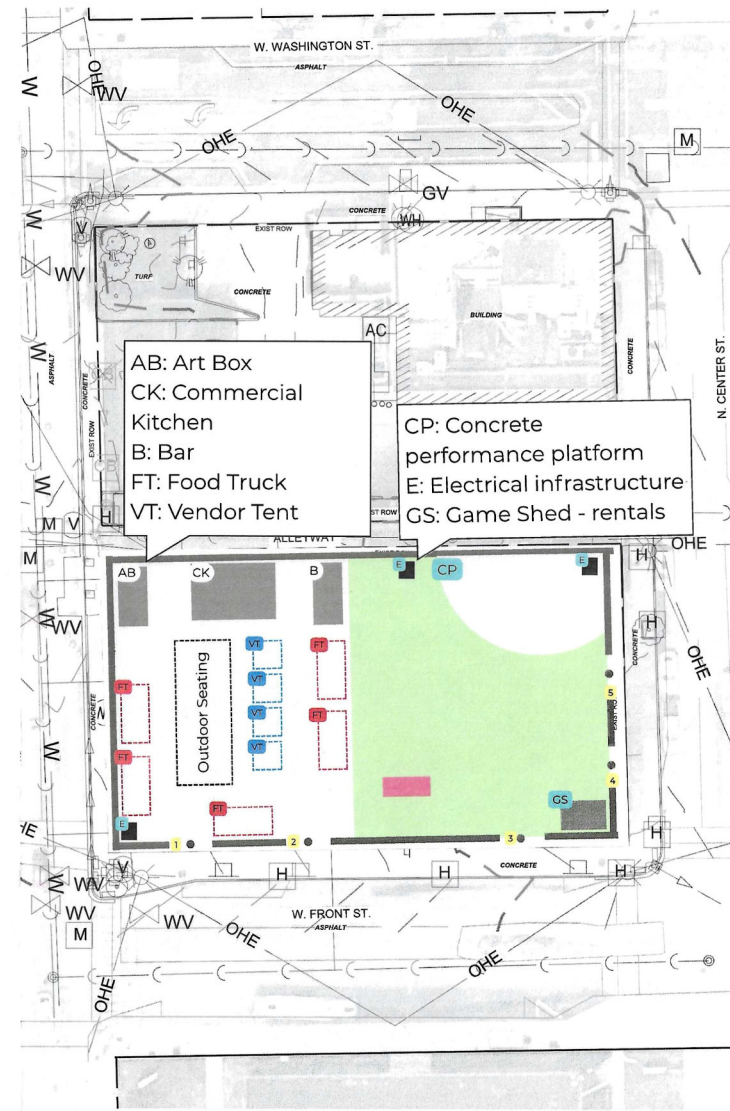
Group Drafts

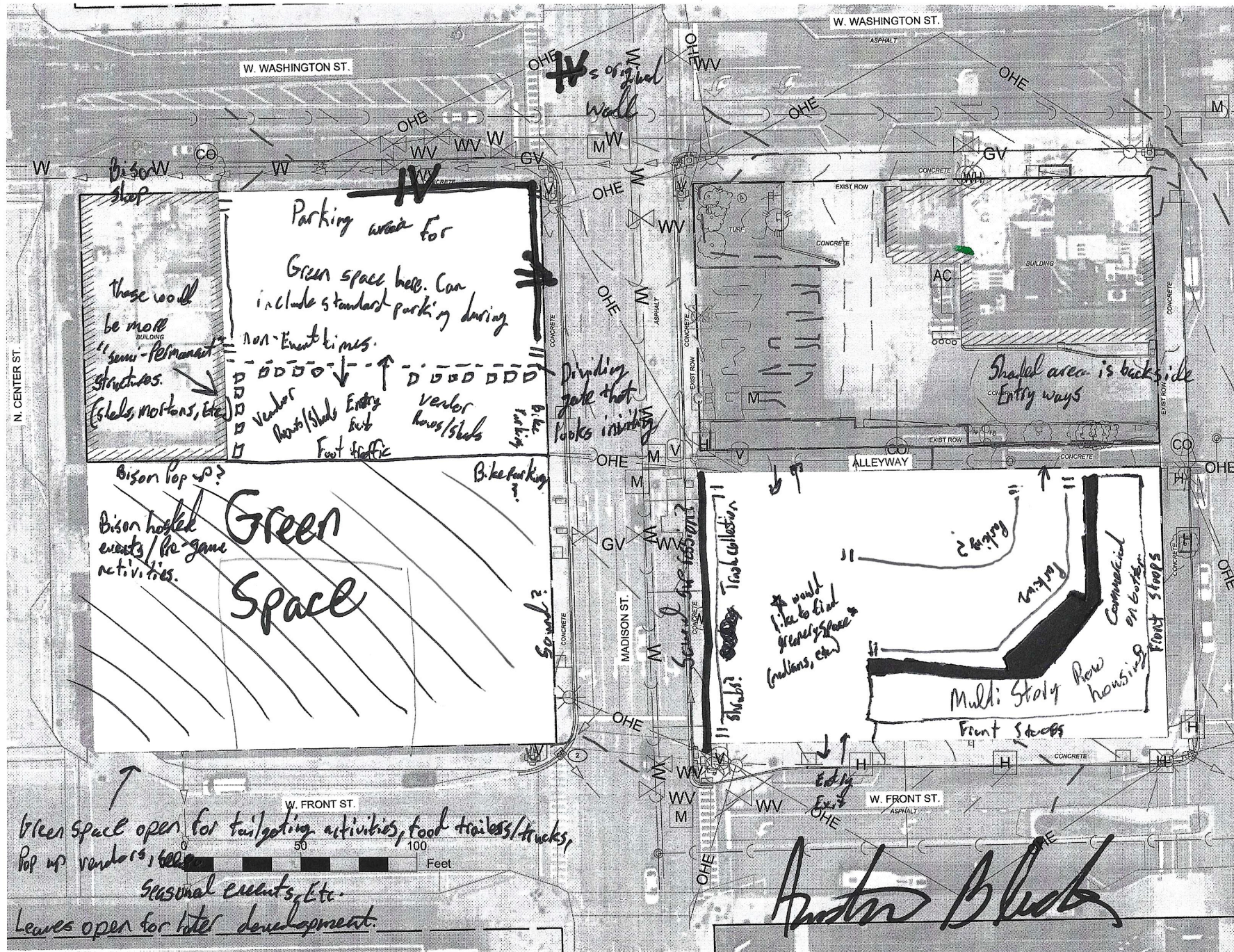
We decided to attach the drafts of the charrette participants as an additional way to inspire people what a future vision of the area could be like.

LOW/ Medium Intensity - Cargo Container Park

Notes:

- Art Box, Commercial Kitchen, Bar, and Game Shed would all be permanent structures with plumbing & electrical infrastructure.
- The electrical infrastructure indicated with black boxes would be similar to the electrical boxes found around the district, with the ability to pull service into distribution boxes.
- The outlined food truck spots could support an outdoor food hall of sorts with rotating food trucks & a calendar, rent would be charged for the spaces with potential to have some renting space in the commissary kitchen.
- Fencing surrounding the space will be sound-dampening with opportunities for temporary mural installations on vinyl - could be run as a competition at local high schools for 2 panels, a couple of panels for local collegiate artists, and a couple of professional panels.
- Entrances 1-3 should be ramped so that vehicles can enter the space, and all should have bollards that can be removed and replaced





W. WASHINGTON ST.

W. WASHINGTON ST.

N. CENTER ST.

Bison shop

Parking area for

Green space here. Can include standard parking during non-event times.

these would be more "semi-permanent" structures. (sheds, mortars, etc.)

Vendor Booth/Sheds Entry Exit Foot traffic Vendor hours/sheds

Drinking gate that looks inviting

Bison Pop up?

Bison hockey events / pre-game activities.

Green Space

Bike parking

Sound?

MADISON ST.

Sound area? "Sheds? Trail collection"

It would like to find green space (indians, etc.)

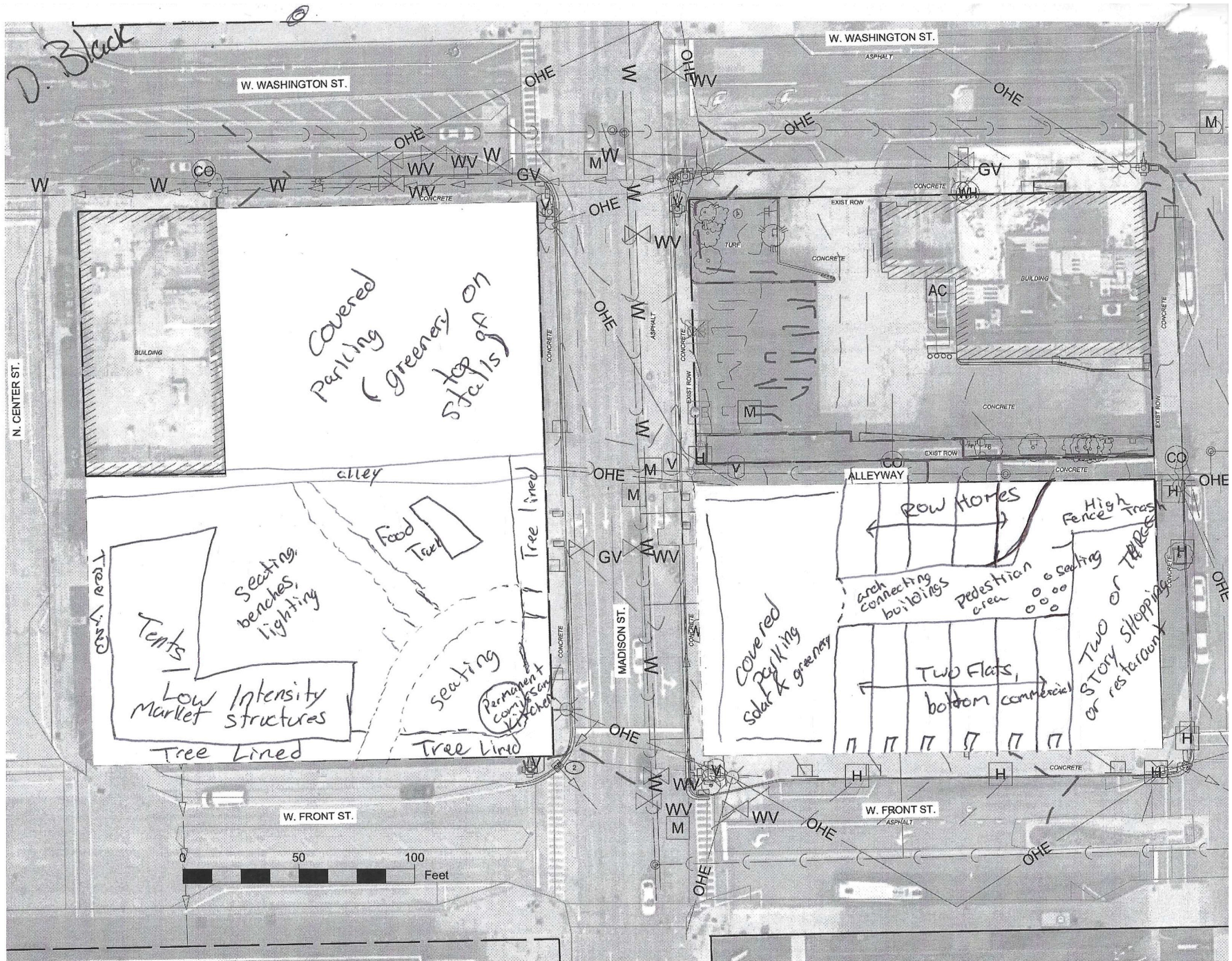
Shaded area is backside Entry ways

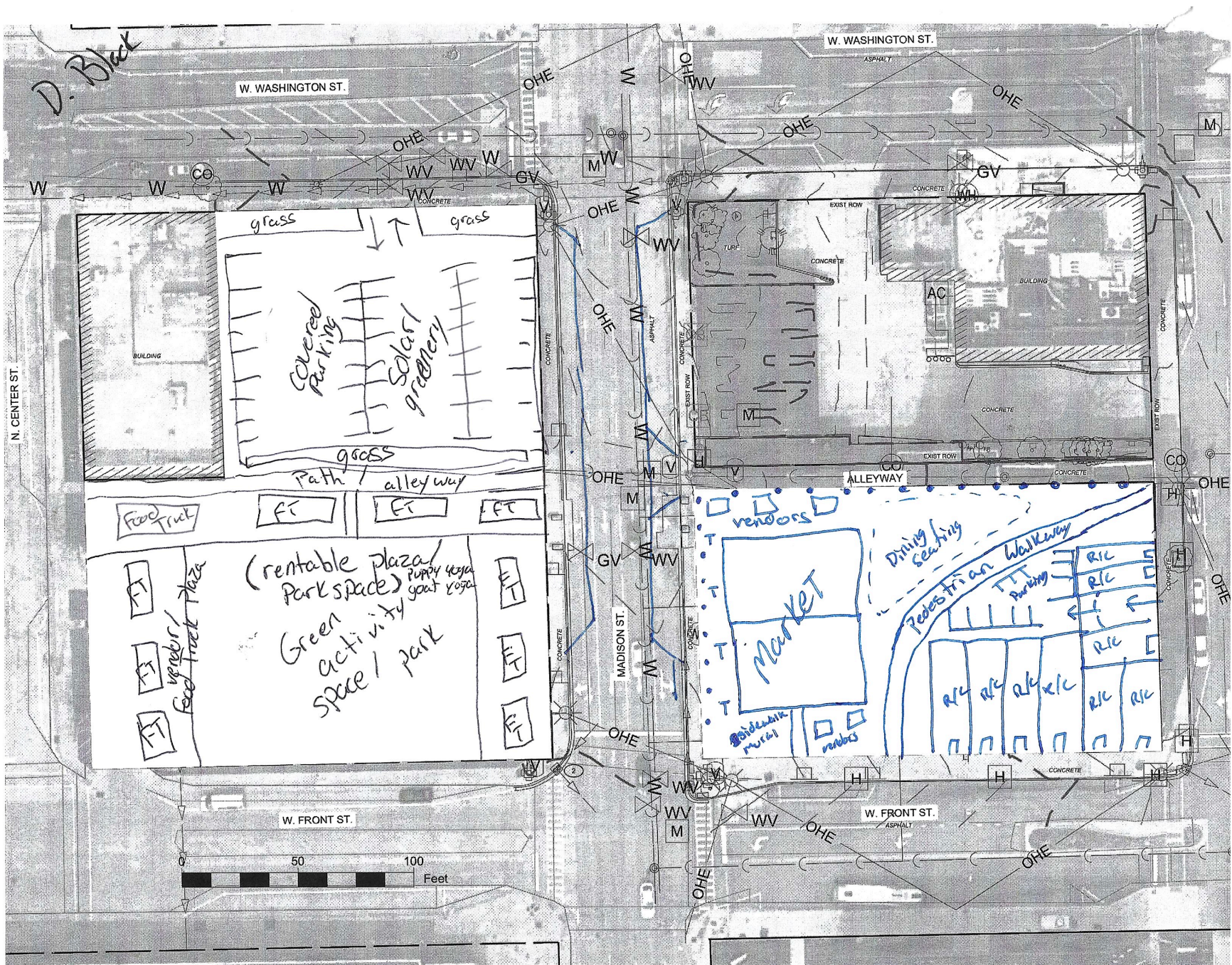
Multi Story Row housing Front Stoops

Green space open for tailgating activities, food trailers/trucks, pop up vendors, seasonal events, etc.

Leaves open for later development.

Austin Black





D. Block

W. WASHINGTON ST.

W. WASHINGTON ST.

N. CENTER ST.

Food Truck

FT

FT

FT

FT
FT
FT
vender/
food truck plaza

(rentable plaza/
park space)
Green
activity
space / park

FT
FT
FT

MADISON ST.

ALLEYWAY

Market

vendors

driving seating

pedestrian walkway

RIC

RIC

RIC

RIC

RIC

RIC

RIC

RIC

RIC

RIC

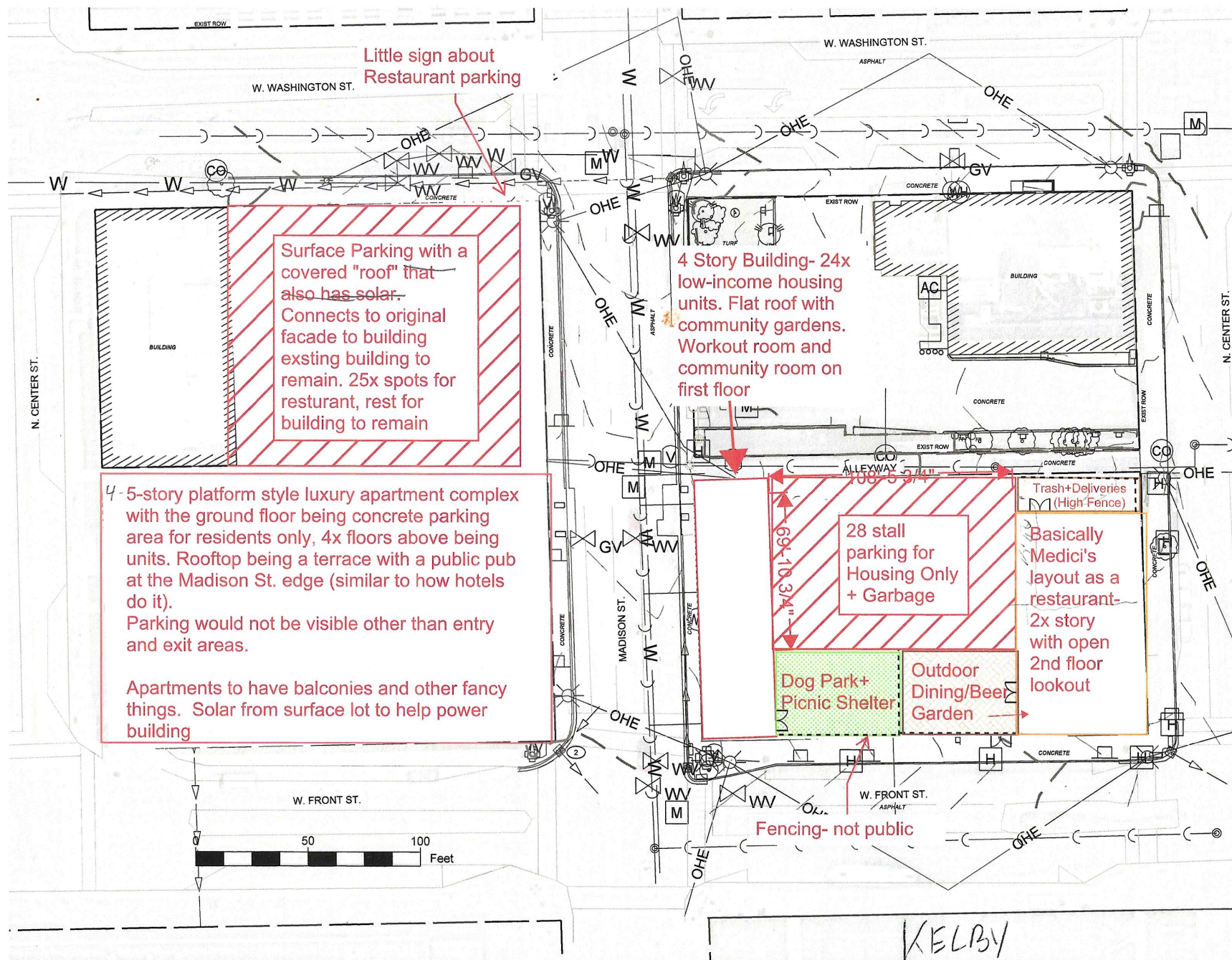
RIC

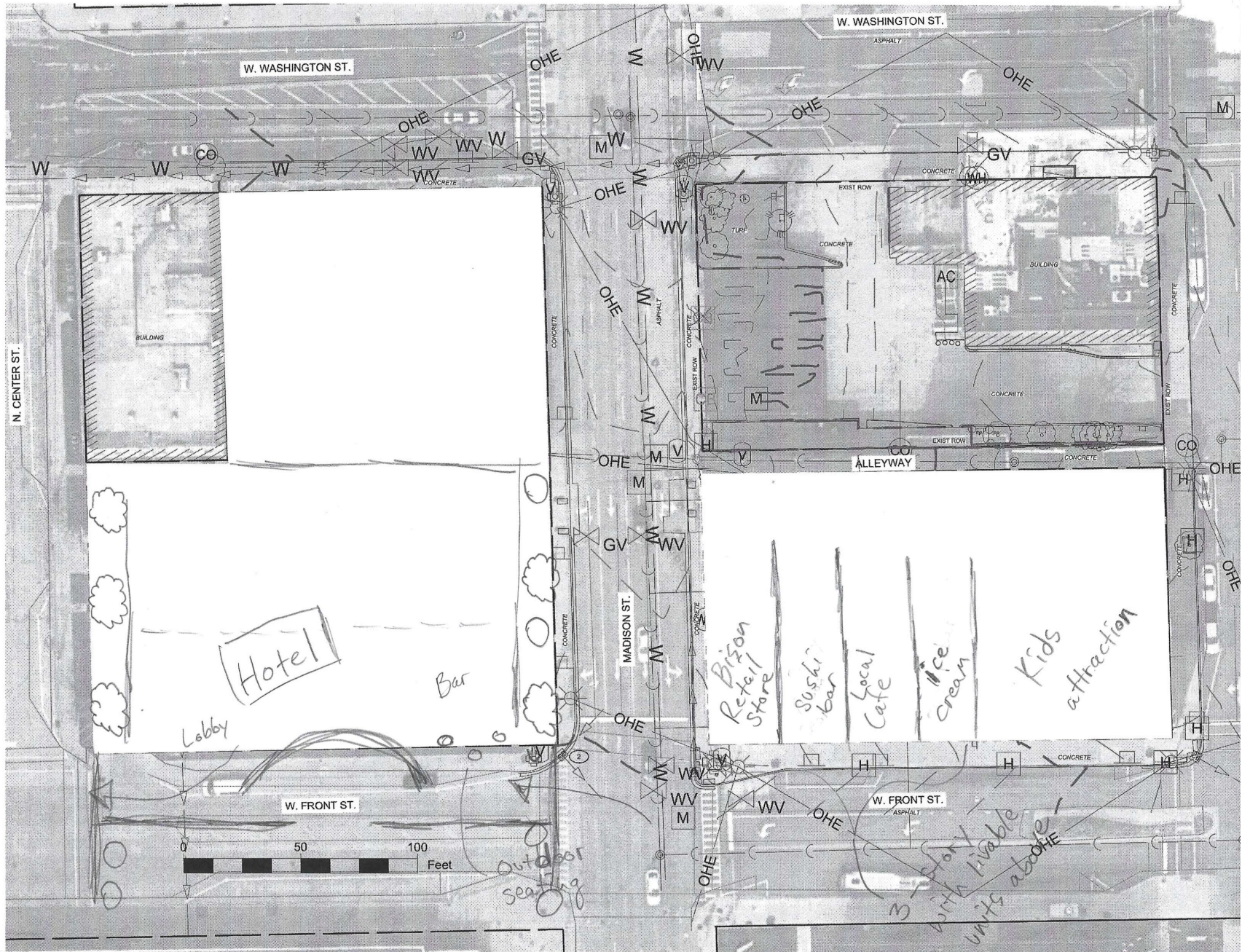
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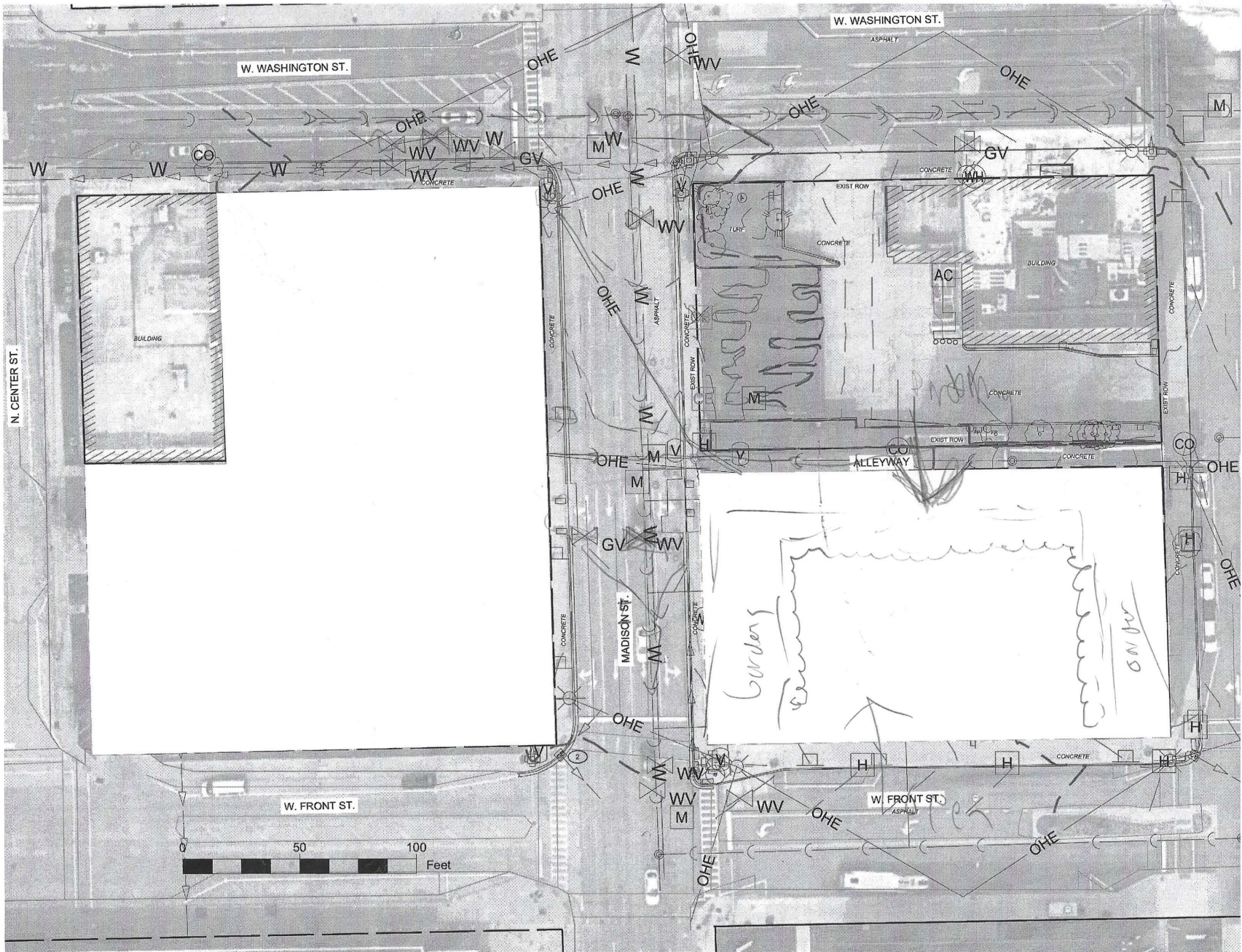
W. FRONT ST.

W. FRONT ST.

0 50 100 Feet

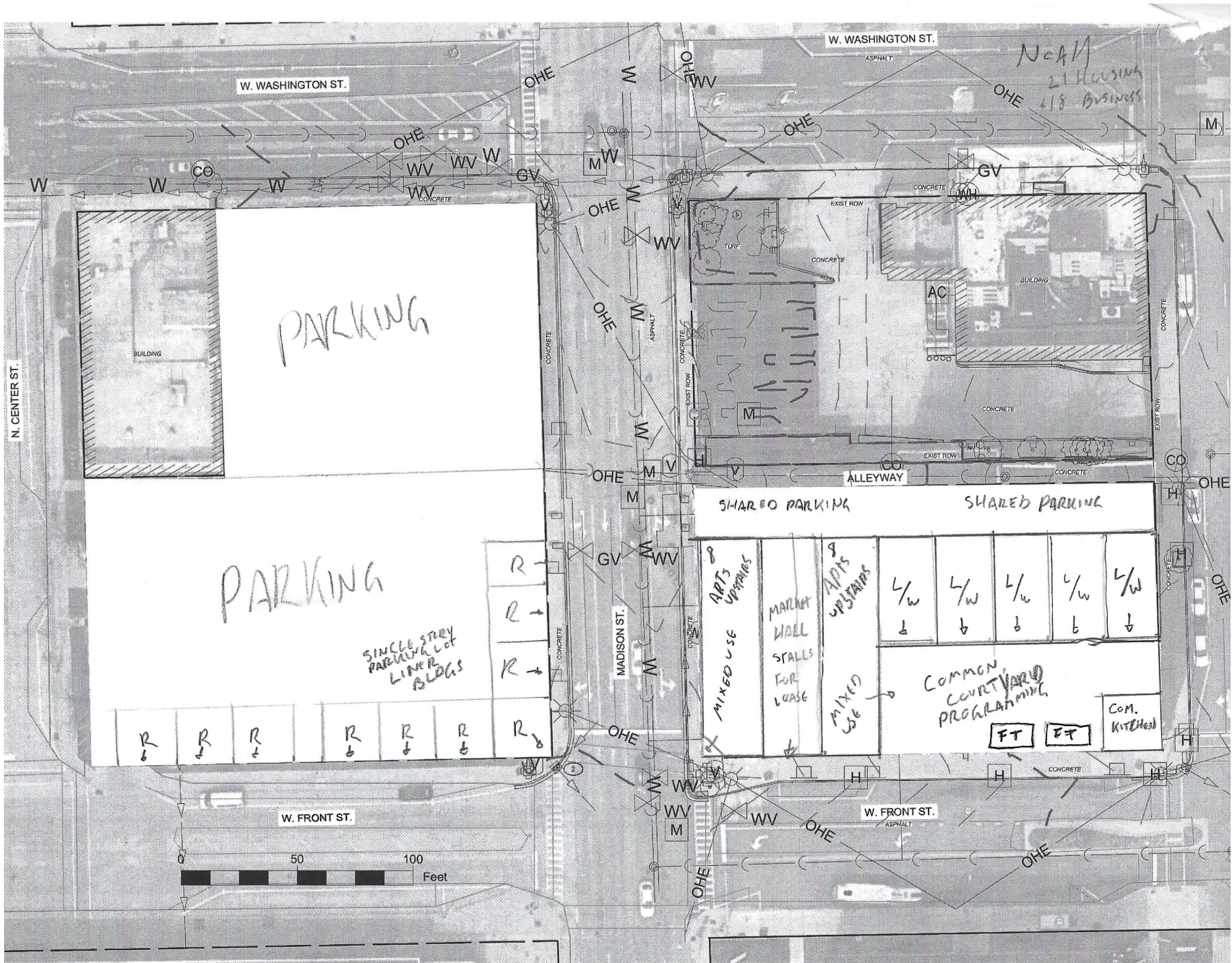


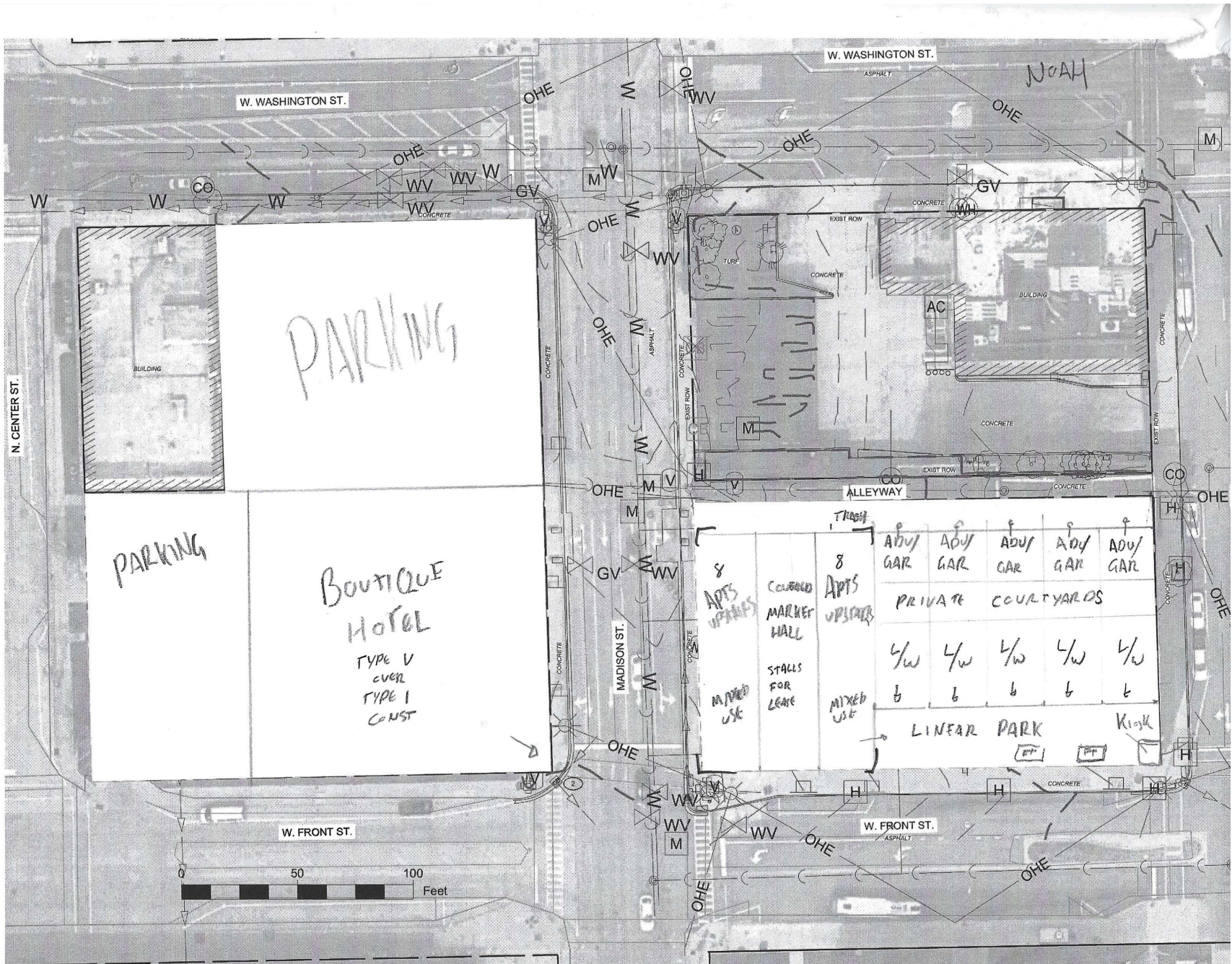












ROBBIE O.



Credits

Special thanks to the people who helped finalized charrette materials for publishing:

Noah Tang: rendering, layout, text drafts

Tyler Pessler: CAD designs, copy editing, cost estimates

Aza Verove and Robbie Osenga: cost estimates

Alan Lessoff: copy editing

Georgene Chissell: draft text

Shea Grehan: videography and photography

Paul Emge: photography