Tree-lined streets, multilevel parking structures, new businesses, residential apartments—all are part of the new vision for downtown Jackson.

The following pages feature renderings from the Jackson Community Master Plan. Adopted by the Jackson City Planning Commission in May 2016, the plan has been years in the making, and continues to evolve. The City retained Beckett & Raeder Inc., an Ann Arbor-based landscape architecture, planning, engineering and environmental services firm, to assist in creating the plan. As an example, this page shows how W. Michigan Ave., the downtown stretch between Mechanic and Jackson streets, could look, with a multistory residential building with a parking garage behind it.

The Master Plan has been in the works since 2012, even before the former Consumers Energy building at 212 W. Michigan Ave. was demolished. The City, which owned the property, initially looked at an interim use for the property and held a competition among three firms to come up with the best plan for the now expanded Blackman Park. “We asked them to give us temporary and permanent ideas,” said Patrick Burtch, Jackson’s City Manager and member of the Planning Commission. “Beckett & Raeder showed us a rendition that blew us away. That’s what started this whole process.”

Burtch added, “The nucleus of this entire community— not just the City of Jackson—is this downtown core. If it’s not healthy, the rest of it dies a slow death. The economic research out there is overwhelming that cities don’t survive unless they have strong urban cores.”

Details about the Jackson Community Master Plan are available at www.jacksonmasterplan.bria2.net; Burtch spoke with Jackson Magazine to highlight key components of the plan.
Depicted here is the Jackson Streetscape Master Plan, which includes everything inside the downtown Jackson loop. “We started picking out sites for infill projects, which are what the shaded properties (on the map) are,” Burtch explained.

The word “infill” simply means “filling in gaps;” in urban planning, infill refers to new developments (residential and/or mixed-use) built on empty lots between existing structures.

The plans shows infill on properties we thought made sense,” Burtch said. “We’re showing (potential developers) that when someone reconstructs a parking lot or space in this loop, here’s how it ought to look from an urban design space standard perspective. A sea of asphalt doesn’t work anymore; one option is to go vertical with parking.” Burtch said they only looked at infill projects on city-owned property; privately owned
property could offer more options in the future.

Residential properties play a key role in downtown’s future, Burtch said. “There is a myriad of research on urban density. Communities that survive over a period of time and are thriving are communities that have high density residential in their urban cores.”

The streets around downtown, including Louis Glick Highway and Washington Ave., are shown as converted from one-way to two-way roads.
One project on this illustration is already under way—the Lofts on Louis. Located at 209 W. Louis Glick Highway, the project, from developers Kincaid Henry, Dr. Nicholas Dyc and John Burtka of the Grand River Brewery, broke ground in November 2016. The four-story, mixed-use development was proposed as a ground-floor urban grocery along with the 30 apartment units.

Mindy Bradish-Orta, President and CEO of the Anchor Initiative, said it is easier for developers to step up and take the risk on building a new apartment building when they know in advance of putting a shovel in the ground that a significant number of those apartments are already “sold.” “That’s a very important role that the Anchor Initiative members play in helping to make these projects happen,” she said. The Anchor Initiative is Jackson’s private-sector effort focused on transforming downtown.

The illustration offers a closer look at the conversion of Louis Glick Highway to two-way traffic. “It also has parking on that road facing east, which is unusual,” said Burtch. “The two-way transformation will be done late next fall, about the same time that John’s building is done.”

The rendering also shows how downtown could look with buildings taller than four stories. Burtch said while the Planning Commission recognizes multistory buildings over four stories cost proportionately more, “We wanted to show people at a later date, when the rent values sustain it, these are the kinds of buildings we ought to be encouraging and facilitating. Once we get to the point we are building mid-size buildings, aren’t we getting to where we are building eight- and 11-story buildings again because the money makes sense? The higher you go, the more density you have and the higher efficiency your infrastructure is being utilized.”

Pictured in the background is the Hayes Hotel (in red); a deal was reached last summer where Home Renewal Systems will invest $25 million-plus into construction and rehabilitation of the long-time vacant building into a multiuse building expected to include apartments, a hotel, restaurants and office space.

“The city has already invested about $500,000, including replacing the roof at a cost of $320,000; that offsets some of the costs to the developer,” said Burtch. The look of the Hayes Hotel has evolved as the renderings evolved and now includes rooftop dining and greenery.

Bradish-Orta said members of the Anchor Initiative have made significant commitments on apartment rentals and hotel room night stays to the group leading the redevelopment of the Hayes Hotel. The Anchor Initiative’s strength is in connecting interested parties aggregating support from the anchors including their financial investment, as well as willingness to commit to hotel room nights, rent incentives, corporate-use apartments, and more,” she said.

Added Burtch, “This isn’t about things that aren’t going to happen. It’s actually happening. You’re convincing the people with the wherewithal to do these projects to say, ‘I can do that. I can put my mark on downtown Jackson. I can be a person that comes to the table.’”
Burtch said the look of the Eastern and Western Gateways relate back to the Master Plan. “What does the entrance to this urban core look like?” he asked. “If you look at Cooper, Elm, Lansing, West, Page; this city now owns a lot of property. We pursued a solution utilizing federal and local funds; we went after the houses that were vacant in those specific areas first so we could start cleaning up our corridors into the city.”

“Right now, when we get to downtown, where do we go? We get on a one-way street that takes us around downtown and doesn’t give us a way to get back into downtown. It confuses anyone who doesn’t live here,” Burtch said. Notable here is how vehicles can go back and forth on Louis Glick and avoid the railroad tracks.

On the illustration showing the Western Downtown Gateway, Burtch said it is important to give people the feeling they are coming into downtown. Veterans Park will now be much larger, with First Street no longer dividing it; and additional parking in front of the First Church of Christ, Scientist.

The illustration of the Eastern Downtown Gateway, with the top of the Amtrak train station in the foreground, shows two-way traffic and additional greenery, as well as infill on the right corner that was designed to fit the space and work from an architectural point of view.
The corner building shown here, located across from the Jackson Coffee Company, depicts a multilevel parking garage; it is the front view of the building featured in the background on the first page of this section.

“You typically don’t put parking garages on a corner like this, so the first floor would all be commercial retail space,” explained Burtch. “You would have a ramp in the back to take you to all the parking above that space. But it looks like a building – it doesn’t look like a garage.”

Burtch said garages are clearly more expensive than surface parking; garages work out to $22,000 per space, compared to $7,500 a space for a surface spot. “We have to stop using all our land downtown for surface parking,” he said. “We can do some of it, but in the city we are looking at vertical build.”

Momentum is building, Burtch said, and he continues to see more companies leading the charge. “When we first started looking at (the Master Plan) we didn’t have a front line. Now we have a line like the Anchor Initiative and business leaders in this community who are invested downtown, whether or not they have a physical investment.”

“Jackson needs to start dreaming big,” he added. “We are going to ramp it up, and we’re not stopping.”