

RAD Resilience Plan

A Unified RAD + RiverLink Collaboration
Led by the Community
Powered by Etsy
Designed by Sasaki
Informed by the River



March 2026

Acknowledgments

This report was commissioned by RiverLink and Unified RAD and produced by Sasaki Associates. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the members of the project's steering committee, whose expertise was instrumental in shaping this vision. Special appreciation goes to the artists, residents, business owners, property owners, developers and workers in the River Arts District and those who generously shared their time and insights, providing invaluable perspectives on the needs and aspirations of the RAD community.

Funding Partner

We are deeply grateful to Etsy for its generous support of the River Arts District (RAD) Visioning and Planning process. In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, this investment brought artists, small businesses, residents, and community partners together to chart a shared path forward. Beyond producing a project matrix, Etsy's support forged lasting partnerships and catalyzed millions of dollars in public and private investment now advancing the RAD's long-term recovery, resilience, and creative economy.

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Remembrance

We honor the memory of Brian Schick, whose thoughtful contributions to the River Arts District will remain an enduring part of his legacy.

RIVERLINK

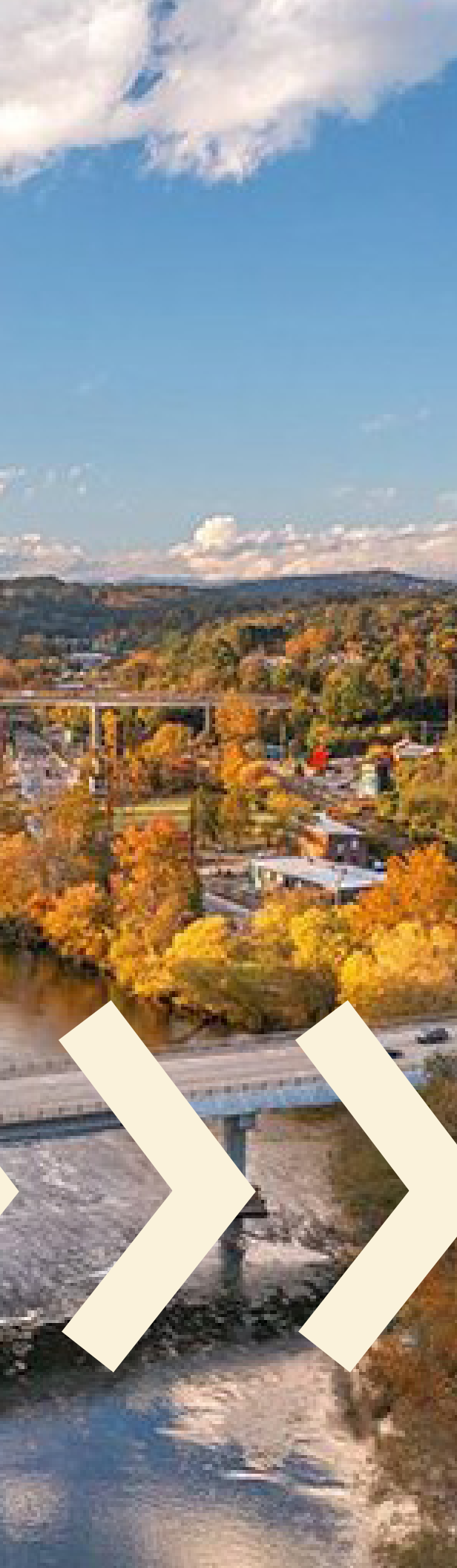
UNIFIED RAD

SASAKI

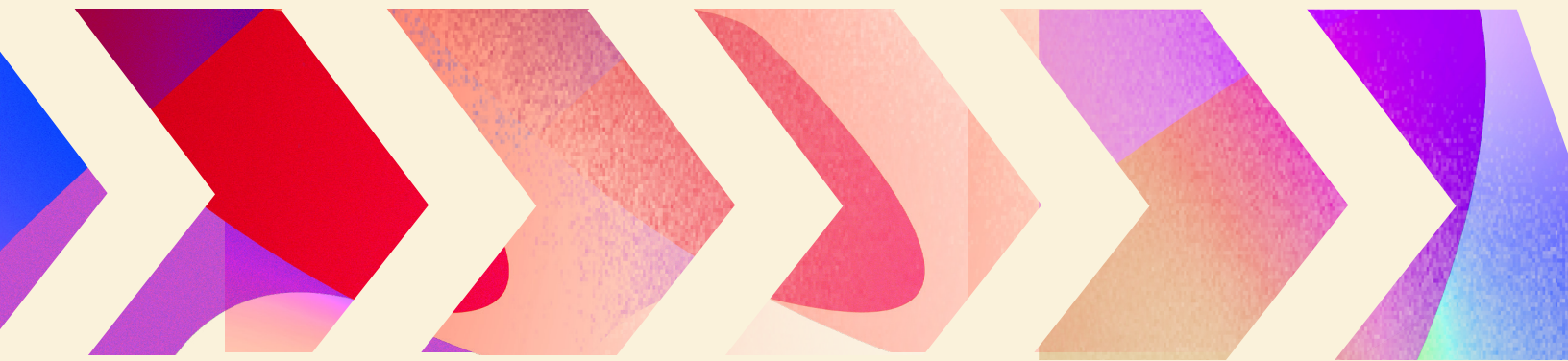
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1 Project Overview



Project Overview

The River Arts District (RAD) has long been a creative hub and community destination, home to over 700 artists working in a variety of media. As the River Arts District Artists website indicates, its unique location on the banks of the French Broad River, the use of historic industrial buildings, and its context in the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains all contribute to its rich history. With over 12.5 million visitors a year, the RAD represented a major destination and economic engine to the region.¹

Unfortunately, in September 2024, Hurricane Helene caused catastrophic flooding, significantly impacting many district artists and businesses. According to the City of Asheville, some 80% of the RAD was damaged or destroyed. Many artist studios and supporting businesses (including coffee shops, restaurants, breweries, and bakeries) were either heavily damaged or simply demolished, fundamentally altering the district's landscape. Today, the RAD community is focused on rebuilding, born in the same spirit of creativity and reinvention that has defined its history for decades. However, given the district's flood-prone location, it is imperative that the rebuilding efforts include intentional and actionable resiliency measures in order to reduce future losses and allow the RAD to rebuild and thrive in a time of changing climate.

RiverLink (a 35-year-old conservation organization dedicated to the environmental and economic vitality of the French Broad River watershed and a key driver in the original RAD vision) and Unified RAD (a coalition of artists, property owners, business owners and residents focused on short-term reactivation, medium-term rebuilding, and long-term vision building all in a way that balances the creative spirit, economy + environment in the district) pursued the following plan to secure the district's restoration for the long term.

The new Resilience Visioning + Planning effort for the RAD has the creative community at the center. Partnering with other key stakeholders—we created a more flood resilient RAD through Charrettes (a carefully structured series of workshops with Sasaki to generate and refine design ideas and solutions), resulting in actionable resilience outcomes for the artisans at the individual, community and district levels.

1) ArtsAVL. (2024, April 10). The River Arts District reckons with sustainability. ArtsAVL. <https://artsavl.org/the-river-arts-district-reckons-with-sustainability/>—“A draw for locals and an estimated 12.5 million visitors a year...”

Project Goals

- 1. Meet the grant obligations of prioritizing the art/craft community's ability to thrive in a more flood resilient RAD.**
- 2. Achieve broad stakeholder engagement, collaboration, education, alignment, and buy-in.**
- 3. Include a diverse representation of RAD stakeholders (Tier I & II) throughout process.**
- 4. Achieve outcomes that will support and promote the RAD's economic vitality, unique sense of place, and reputation as a cultural epicenter for the creative arts**

Project Approach

The visioning process was organized into three phases—Discovery, Big Ideas, and Implementation Strategy—each building upon the last to move from understanding current conditions, to shaping transformative concepts, to defining a clear path for action.

Phase 1: Discovery

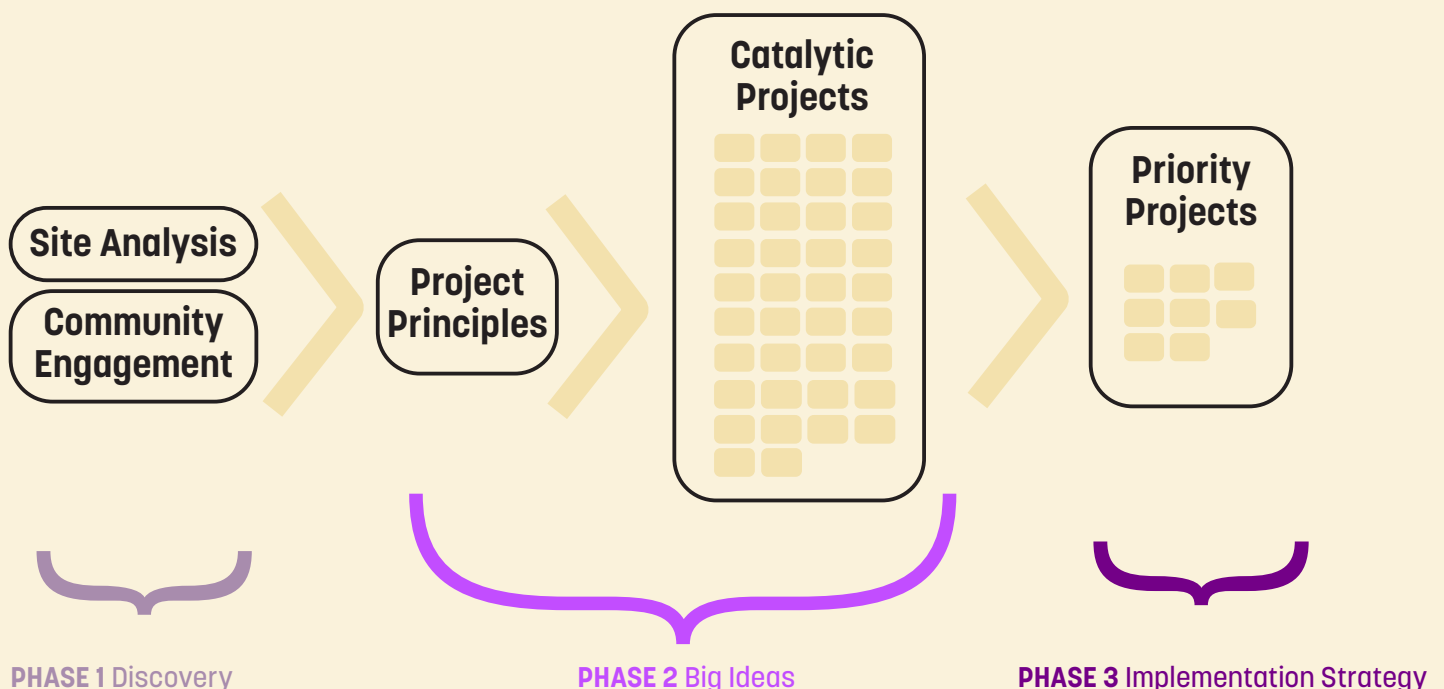
The goal of the discovery phase allowed the project team to build a deep, shared understanding of the RAD’s existing conditions, community values, challenges, and opportunities before shaping any recommendations. This phase focused on listening, learning, and gathering insights—from stakeholder engagement to technical analysis—to ensure the project is grounded in lived experience, cultural context, ecological realities, and the operational needs of the district. By establishing this foundation, the Discovery Phase sets the stage for a visioning process that is informed, responsive, and aligned with the community’s priorities.

Phase 2: Big Ideas

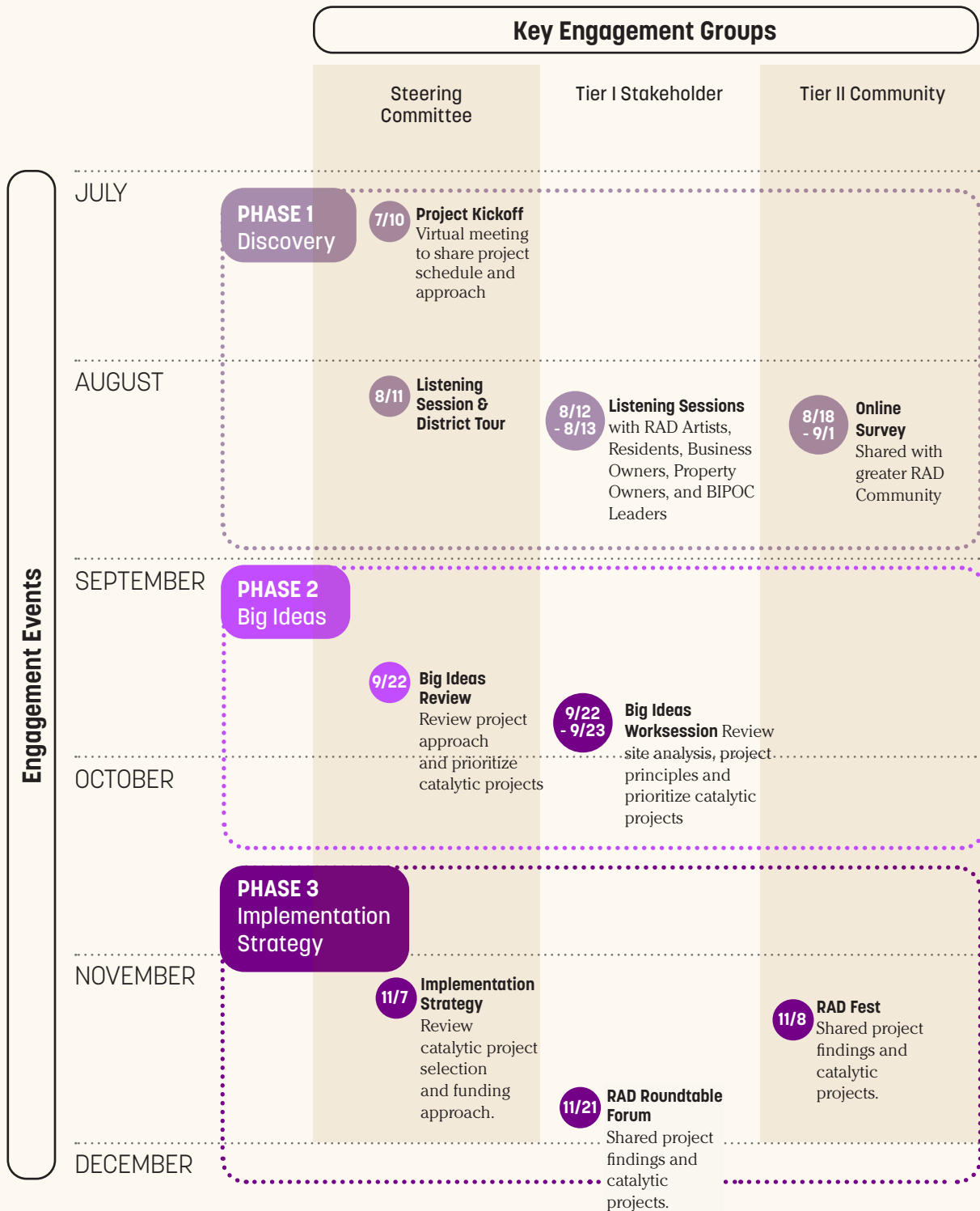
During the second phase of the visioning effort, the project team distilled the major themes from the first phase of engagement into a clear set of project principles. Building on these insights, the team developed preliminary catalytic projects to spark broader positive change within the district or community.

Phase 3: Implementation Strategy

The final phase of the project consolidated work from earlier stages into the following comprehensive report that further defines the elements and criteria of each of the identified catalytic Projects.



Project Schedule



Key Engagement Groups

The overall visioning process aimed to ensure that the project is guided by informed leadership and shaped by a diverse, representative cross-section of RAD stakeholders and community members.

The project's charrettes and engagement events were designed to engage the project's Steering Committee, Tier I Stakeholders, and Tier II Community Members

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee met with the project team at major milestones to guide key decisions and ensure the visioning effort remained aligned with its goals and values. The Steering Committee is composed of assigned representatives from ArtsAVL, RADA, RADBiz, URAD, property owners, residents, RiverLink, Black Wall Street, BCTDA, and the City of Asheville.

Tier I Stakeholders & Tier II Community Members

To ensure the project's engagement included a diverse representation of RAD voices, stakeholders and community members were grouped into two tiers.

Tier I Stakeholders are those within the RAD who directly shape and experience the district daily, including artists, business owners, employees, residents, property owners, and BIPOC leaders.

Tier II Community Members are those outside the RAD who interact with and support the district, such as adjacent neighborhoods and businesses, local and visiting users, and customers.

Strategic engagement with both groups ensures that project outcomes are contextually informed, inclusive, and reflective of the full community connected to the RAD.





2 Site Analysis

District History

For more than 10,000 years, the land was home to the Cherokee Nation, who knew the river as “Tahkeyostee,” or “racing place,” and relied on it for transportation, sustenance, and spiritual life. This deep connection was violently disrupted in 1838 with the Trail of Tears, which forced the Cherokee from their ancestral lands, leaving only the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians on a small portion of their homeland.

European settlement in the 1600s and 1700s brought small farms followed by rapid industrialization after the Civil War. The expansion of the railroad transformed the river corridor into a manufacturing hub. Tanneries, cotton mills, stockyards, furniture and shoe factories, warehouses, and icehouses flourished, making the district a regional economic engine. This prosperity was severely disrupted by the catastrophic flood of 1916, which destroyed many industries and pushed development to higher ground, reshaping the area’s industrial landscape.

In the mid-20th century, urban renewal policies further altered the district, resulting in the displacement of Black communities and the destruction of homes, churches, and businesses in the East Riverside area.

Beginning in the 1980s, artists moved into the area’s abandoned industrial buildings, gradually transforming the district into a creative community. Events like the Studio Stroll and organized artist advocacy led to the official naming of the River Arts District in 2005 and the formation of River Arts District Artists, Inc. in 2013, marking the district’s evolution from industrial powerhouse to vibrant cultural center.

Hurricane Helene

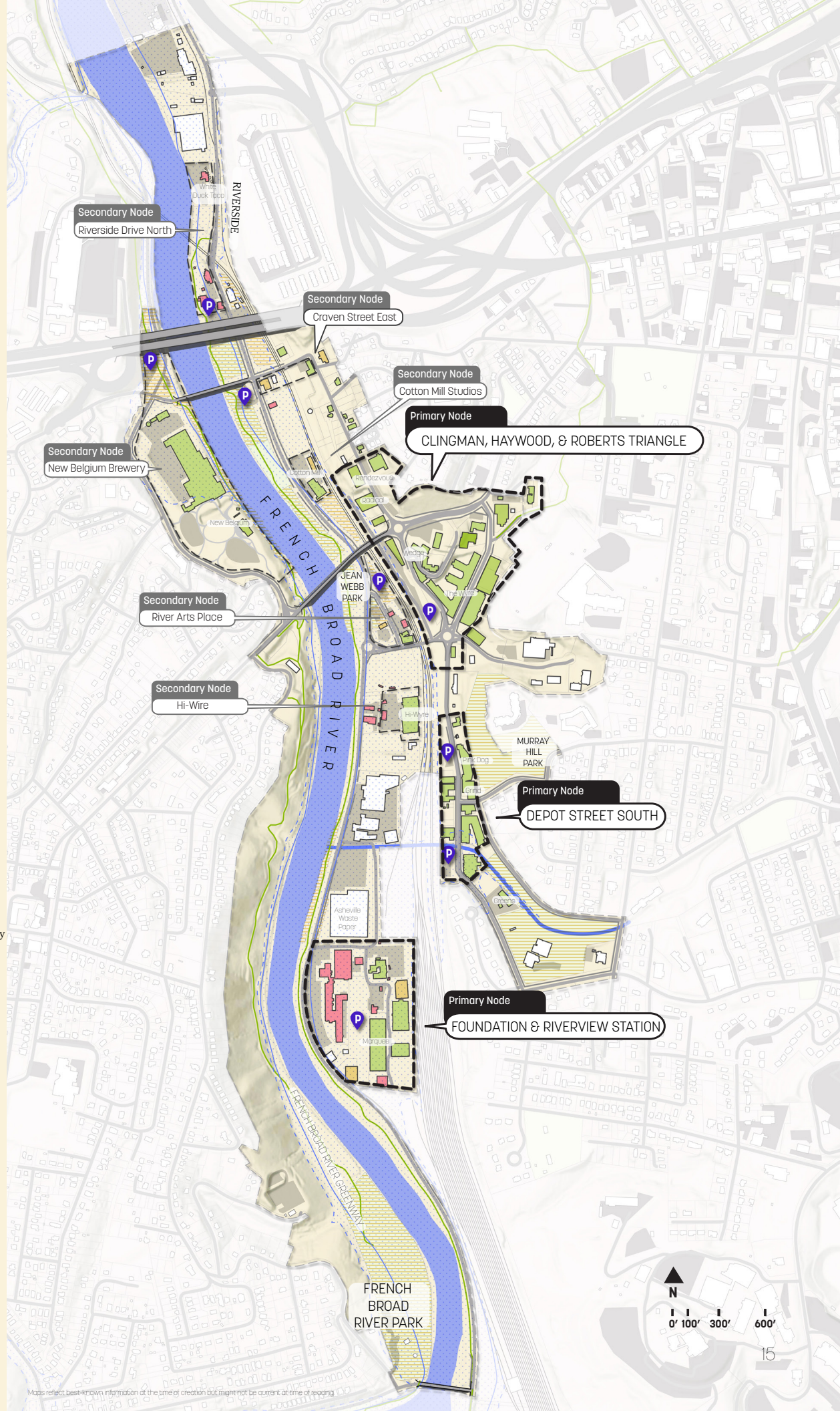
In late September 2024, Hurricane Helene brought record-breaking rainfall and catastrophic inland flooding to western North Carolina, including Asheville and the RAD. The French Broad River crested at historic levels, inundating most of the low-lying district and resulting in severe flood damage to studios, galleries, businesses, and infrastructure. The storm’s surge flooded nearly the entire district, with estimates that around 70–80% of buildings and artistic spaces were damaged or destroyed. The storm’s effects were devastating to the district, exacerbating underlying issues related to affordability, connectivity, and resilience.

Existing Conditions Analysis

The following site analysis documents the conditions in the RAD approximately a year after Helene’s landfall, in the Fall of 2025, representing a snapshot in time as ongoing recovery and rebuilding efforts continue to reshape the district’s physical landscape.

Floodplain Damage

The district’s lowest-lying areas, situated east of the French Broad River and west of the train tracks, lie within the 100-year floodplain as mapped by FEMA. The majority of the structures in this zone sustained significant damage. Many key businesses and studio spaces have yet to reopen.



Legend

- River Arts District Boundary
(As defined by the City of Asheville)
- Primary District Node
- Secondary District Node
- Floodway
- 100-Year Flood Boundary
- P Public Parking Lot
- City of Asheville Owned Property
- Rail Barrier
- Steep Slopes
- Business Opened
- Business Opening Soon
- Business Closed
- Miscellaneous Use

Maps reflect best known information at the time of creation but might not be current at time of reading.



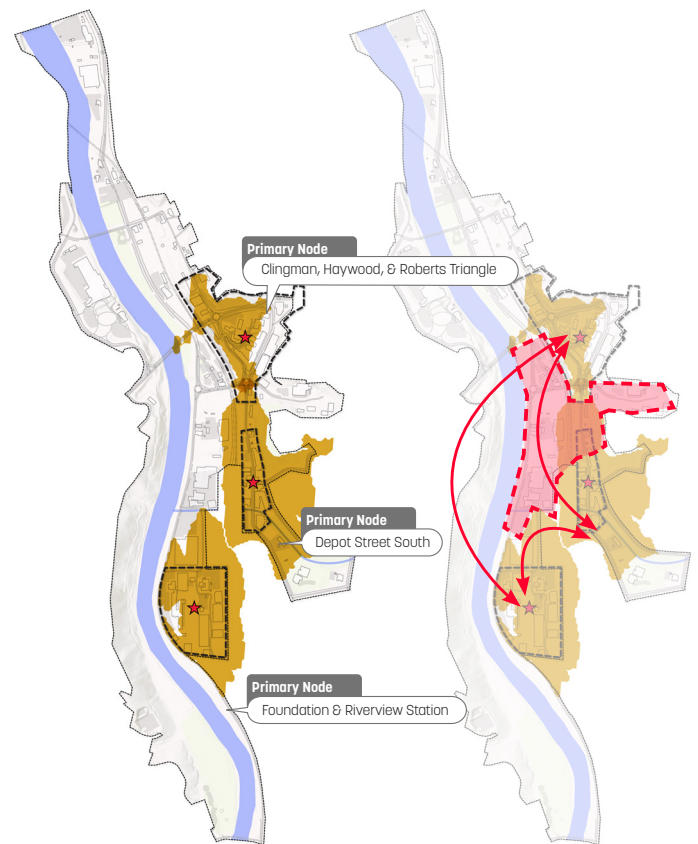
District Connectivity

The district can be understood through primary and secondary nodes, clusters of artists, studio spaces, businesses, and developments that define its character. While connectivity between these zones was already hindered by limited wayfinding and indirect routes prior to the hurricane, business closures and damage caused by Helene have further exacerbated the issue.

The railroad, which runs parallel through the center of the district, creates a significant connectivity barrier. This challenge is particularly pronounced at the district's southernmost primary node—Foundation and Riverview Station.

A walkable district connects community, increases accessibility to amenities, and facilitates district growth. Walkshed studies examine the connectivity of primary, secondary, and parking nodes to each other and the rest of the RAD fabric. These studies also highlight where connections could be improved or where new activity might be added in the future.

Primary Nodes 5 Minute Walksheds

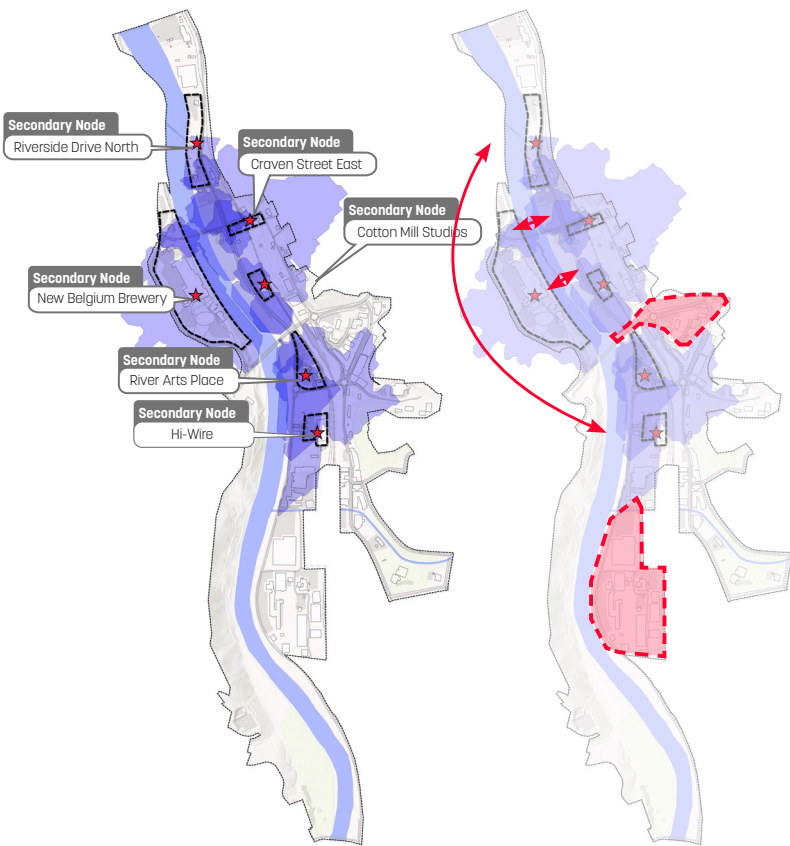


Programmatic Opportunity Zone

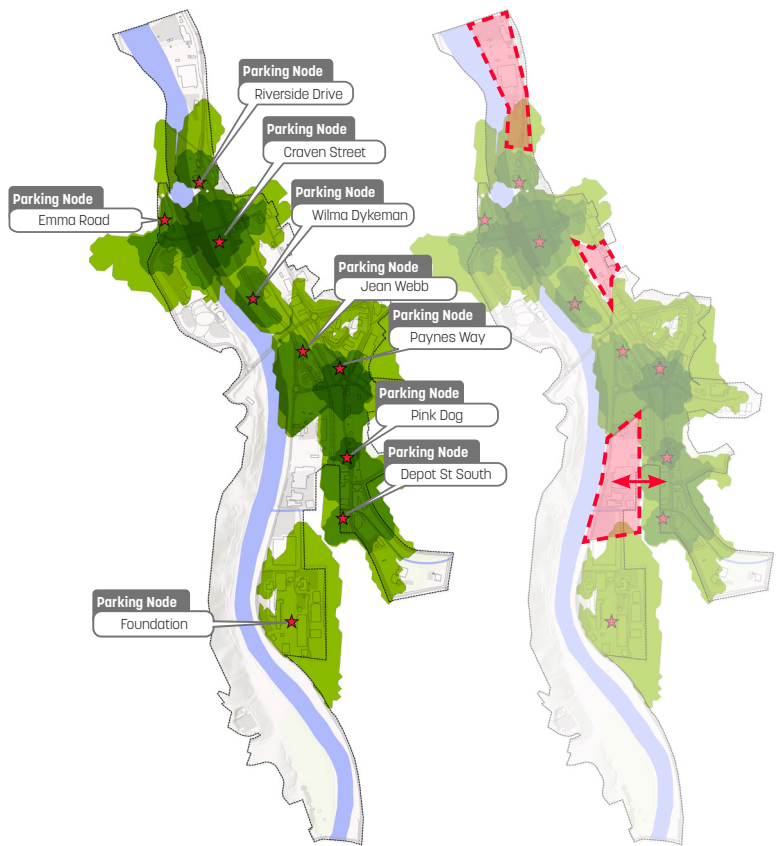


Connectivity Opportunity

Secondary Nodes
5 Minute Walksheds



Parking
5 Minute Walksheds







3

Engagement Events

Engagement Events

Each engagement event throughout the Visioning effort was designed to ensure the project process was shaped by the voices, experiences, and priorities of those most connected to the RAD.

Through a series of targeted workshops, listening sessions, and community outreach activities, the project team gathered meaningful input that directly informed each phase of the project.

Charette 1 Engagement

The first phase of engagement events included listening sessions and an online survey. Each were designed to gather a comprehensive range of insights—from deeply personal, lived experiences to broad community perspectives—to understand what defines the RAD today and what is needed for it to thrive in the future. The listening sessions centered on the voices of those most closely connected to the district, inviting participants to reflect on the features that support quality of life, the elements that should be preserved or strengthened, and the barriers preventing the RAD from becoming a vibrant, flood-resilient district. Complementing this, the online survey expanded outreach to both Tier I and Tier II stakeholders, asking respondents to rank needs, identify desired improvements, and share ideas for new amenities, temporary activations, small-scale enhancements, and transformative long-term investments.

Listening Sessions

On August 12th and 13th, the project team hosted a series of listening sessions with RAD artists, residents, business owners, property owners, City of Asheville staff, and BIPOC

leaders. Each 90-minute session included 12–15 attendees identified by members of the Steering Committee. Participants received a project overview, followed by a one-hour period to reflect on the questions below and a 30-minute facilitated group discussion. All work sessions were held at RiverLink’s offices centrally located within the district.

Online Survey

From August 18th through September 1st, the project team launched an online survey to gather input from both Tier I and Tier II stakeholders. Links to the survey were shared through local social media channels, email blasts, community canvassing, and yard signs placed in high-activity areas throughout Asheville to ensure broad and accessible participation.

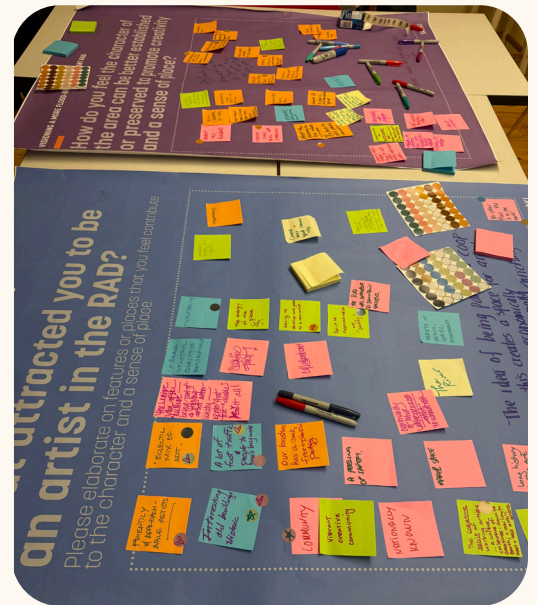
Listening Session Questions

1. What attracted you to living in the RAD? Please elaborate on features or places that you feel contribute to the District's character and sense of place.
2. How do you feel the character of the area can be better established or preserved to promote a vibrant district?
3. What current or past features or amenities in the RAD do you feel best support or supported your quality of life?
4. What new features, services, or amenities do you feel could be built or incorporated into the RAD to better support your quality of life?
5. Do you feel there are barriers or threats to RAD achieving its potential as a vibrant flood-resilient district?

We heard from

100+

RAD Stakeholders throughout the two day Listening Sessions.



Virtual Survey Questions

1. Rank, in their order of greatest need/ impact, the places and uses in the RAD you feel most need to be increased, improved, or added. You may use the open-ended questions later in the survey to provide any specific suggestions.

2. Rank, in their order of greatest need/ impact, the services and amenities in the RAD you feel most need to be increased, improved or added. You may use the open-ended questions later in the survey to provide any specific suggestions.

3. What new places, uses, services, or amenities do you feel should be added in the RAD?

4. What existing places, uses, services, or amenities do you feel should be improved/ increased in the RAD?

5. What EXISTING places, uses, services, or amenities do you feel should be changed/stopped in the RAD?

6. What are some temporary ways to activate properties/spaces until a more long-term use can be implemented?

7. What are some small things* (i.e. relatively inexpensive, easy, and quick) *you feel could be done to improve the RAD?

8. If money were no object and there were no roadblocks to execution, what big things do you feel could be done to make a huge positive impact on the district/city/ region?

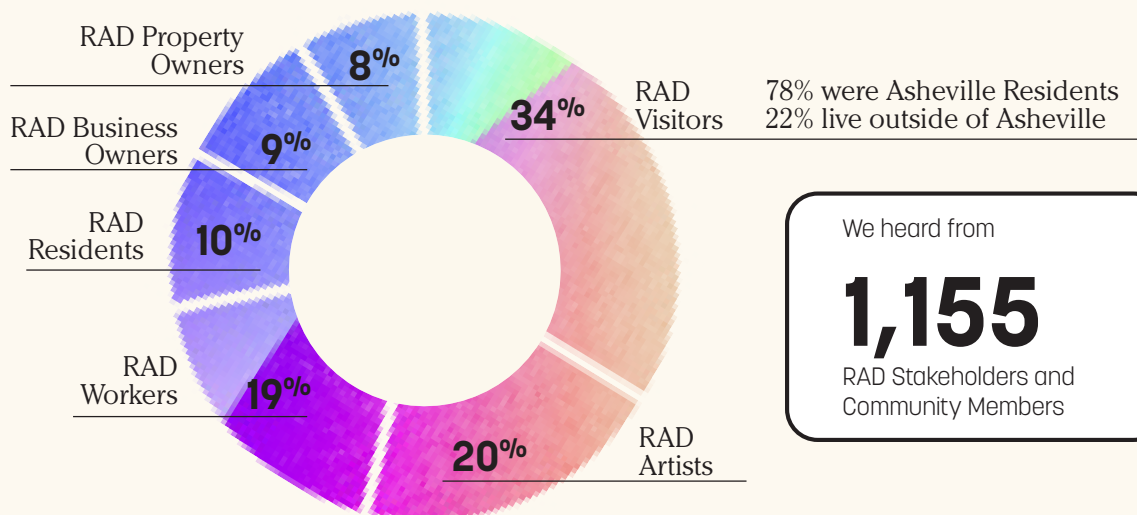
9. What features, spaces, or landmarks do you feel most contribute to the RAD's unique sense of place and should be preserved?

10. What barriers are preventing you from fully participating in the RAD's places, uses, services, or amenities?

11. What things do you feel can be done in the RAD to make it a more vibrant creative economy?

12. What things do you feel can be done in the RAD to make it more flood-resilient?

13. Over the next year, short-term projects will reactivate and connect the RAD, signaling recovery and care of the district. What are your top 5 priority projects?



We heard from
1,155
RAD Stakeholders and
Community Members

Big Ideas Work Session

The second engagement event invited Tier I stakeholders to review and refine the ideas emerging from Phase 1, including key themes, site analysis findings, and draft project principles, ensuring the evolving vision accurately reflected community priorities. Participants were also asked to prioritize catalytic projects across three time horizons—Quick Wins, Next Steps, and Big Moves—helping to shape a clear, community-informed path for near- and long-term investment in the RAD. The two open-house style sessions were held on September 22nd and 23rd at the event space in the Radical Hotel.



RAD Fest

The goal of this event was to inform the broader Asheville community about the project's vision, findings, and progress in an accessible and engaging setting, ensuring residents, visitors, and stakeholders were clearly updated on what was learned, what is envisioned for the district's future, and how community input shaped the

effort. On November 8, the final project findings were shared during the district's annual RAD Fest—a free public event with art vendors, music, and food trucks—where representatives from the Sasaki team, RiverLink, and Unified RAD walked attendees through the visioning effort throughout the day from 10 AM to 5 PM.





OPEN

River
Arts
District



4 Project Principles

What We Heard

Results from the listening sessions and online survey were distilled into the following eight themes. The quotes featured in each word cloud were taken directly from community engagement activities.

1 Flood Resilience & Riverfront Ecology

"Turn some of these flood prone areas into parks and recreation areas. Move the artists... Don't move the RAD, shift."

"Threats: Nasty Branch, upstream impervious surfaces, constriction at French Broad."

"The Greenways/Parks are so very important... make them more flood resilient, increase bank restoration, native plantings, wetlands."

"Use low-lying areas for things that can be cleared within 24 hours: playgrounds, picnic areas, greenways, food truck park; amphitheater made of waterproof materials."

"Replant trees along the banks for a start!"

"Do not rent studio space on the first floor of any building in the flood zone... make first floors easy to remove temporary gallery spaces in an emergency."

"Ecological stormwater systems, more planted areas, scheduling regular community clean-up days."

"We need to respect what the river wants to do... give her the space."

"Completely redesign the river corridor to maximize flood resilience, human recreation utility, river health, and biodiversity. Eliminate impermeable surfaces altogether."

"Embrace the parks that already hold water in the open grassy areas and turn them into diverse storm water wetlands."

2 Affordability & Equity

"Affordable is the key! People come to see the art and to see the artists work. Without this... there would not be a need for the restaurants and coffee houses."

"Incorporate some sort of rent stabilization or lock for artists with working art studio spaces."

"Short-term leases for artists that are actually affordable, small studio spaces under \$500."

"Lift up and showcase artists of color, women, and queer people."

"Make it for locals first! Artists, families, students, educators... design a space for tourists first and it will become a soulless cavern void of the local love."

"When I think about RAD its not for us."

3 Parks, Green Space & Recreation

"Outdoor recreation focus - a park, playground, pump track, disc golf, amphitheater."

"Parks! Skate parks, tennis courts, basketball courts, and bike paths are all in short supply in our city."

"MORE FAMILY FRIENDLY THINGS!! Safe fenced in and shaded park for children (toddler and handicap friendly), an aquarium or hands-on museums for children."

"Temporary activations such as open-air event spaces, playgrounds, pop-up markets, outdoor arts and culture programs, public space performances, outdoor movies, light shows."

"Pump track, skate rink/park, playgrounds, splash pad, art/music venue—really, places for our future population to enjoy this amazing part of Asheville."

4 Everyday Amenities & Core Infrastructure

"Would be nice to see more shaded sitting areas for folks walking through the district."

"Access to drinking water and restrooms without having to go into a business."

"A bodega or convenience store where people can buy basic foodstuffs and daily use items."

5 Safety, Security & Comfort

"Everyone having evacuation plans, central coordination... trucks and helping hands on short notice to get inventory out... a central organization that could fund and support these efforts."

"City feels very hands-off with infrastructural support for RAD."

"Dedicated crews to keep the area clean 24/7."

"Brighter street lights for night safety."

"Manage planted areas and wild areas that have grown over."

6 Connectivity, Mobility & Access

"Regular trolley or bus service between downtown and both Roberts/Depot and Foundry."

"Interactive art installations that also help guide from one place to another. A real focus on making this an AREA instead of individual places."

"Again.... the main issue is PARKING!"

"Make RAD more accessible for the elderly"

"SIDEWALKS, they just end. Roberts is dangerous."

"Rail, shuttle for people from all other neighborhoods to access RAD without a car so there is less traffic and less need for parking."

"Need better pedestrian and bike crossings over the river (Amboy & Craven sidewalks feel unsafe...)"

"Fix the walking and biking paths along French Broad ASAP. Art exhibitions could attract more foot traffic."

7 Arts, Culture & Identity

"Appalachian history and culture education. Music, dance, craft. Bring back Appalachian traditions—it's being lost in the area."

"Don't push art out to the extent that it becomes just galleries or artists booths."

"RAD Welcome Hub: staffed info kiosk + live map + shuttle."

While yes, artists need a place to sell, they need space to work, grow, explore, and get messy."

"The RAD's uniqueness includes the industrial buildings; I don't want everything cleaned up and homogenized."

"RAD is a unique collective of creatives who are down to earth."

"Cultural infrastructure. Being intentional with culture, being intentional with building."

"RAD's spirit is approachable not 'stuffy'."

"Historic industrial architecture anchors the district with its layered history."

"Use these spaces as opportunities to get local artists to create installations... more experimental experiences."

"Revival of murals!"

"Continuing to invest in marketing and branding to show the world what a unique place it is for people to come and buy art direct from artists."

"Welcome/info stations that guide tourists/shoppers to shops, studios, food/drink."

"Need the history to be made visible with exhibits, old photos, and murals."

8 Governance, Policy & Community Support

"Reserving the RAD primarily for the arts through zoning."

"Change zoning regulations to promote temporary event spaces where possible."

"Grants for artist studio spaces... so it doesn't just become a commercial shopping district."

"New architecture should have the same feel of the historic buildings or not overwhelm old buildings."

"No big corporate businesses, local only."

"In our wildest dreams, we would have a professional development officer whose job it would be to raise money for the RAD."

"Design review board for RAD that harnesses creativity that can't be recreated."

"Support/subsidize starting-out artists. More opportunities to create art via advertising and infrastructure."

Project Principles

These six principles translate ‘what we heard’ into guiding statements that will help shape decision-making, design, and idea evaluation.

1 Live With the River

Design flood-resilient places and restore river ecology so the district thrives alongside changing water conditions.

Acknowledge the French Broad as both a defining asset and a dynamic force. Design spaces that adapt to flooding rather than fight it, restore riverbanks with native ecology, and create opportunities for people to engage safely with the water through parks, trails, and recreation. By living with the river—its beauty, power, and cycles—we honor the natural system that shapes the RAD’s identity and future.

Addresses ‘what we heard’ themes of Flood Resilience & Riverfront Ecology

2 Celebrate Arts & Identity

Put artists first, honor cultural histories, and showcase the district’s unique industrial character through art and design.

Keep the arts at the heart of the RAD by protecting creative spaces and showcasing the district’s diverse cultural traditions. Honor its layered history—from industrial roots, Application craft, to vibrant murals—and lift up the voices of artists across race, gender, and background. Support both making and sharing art as everyday experiences, so the RAD remains ‘weird’- authentic, creative, and unmistakably Asheville.

Addresses ‘what we heard’ themes of Arts, Culture & Identity

3 Build Community Through Public Space

Grow parks, greenways, river access, and flexible venues that invite recreation, family life, and shared experiences for all.

Use parks, plazas, greenways, and gathering spaces as the backbone of community life in the RAD. Design public spaces that invite connection—places for recreation, performances, markets, and everyday encounters across ages and backgrounds. Prioritize flexible, inclusive, and welcoming spaces that nurture belonging, strengthen relationships, and reflect the creativity and resilience of the community.

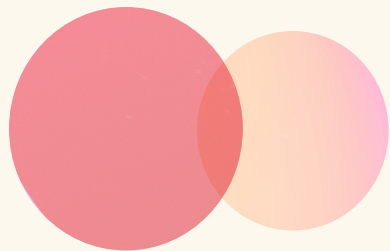
Addresses ‘what we heard’ themes of Parks, Green Space & Recreation

4 Keep it Affordable & Equitable

Support artists, residents, and local businesses with affordable spaces and policies that prevent displacement.

Ensure the RAD remains a place where artists, makers, and residents of all backgrounds can thrive. Protect affordable studio and housing opportunities, provide flexible leases and subsidies, and prioritize local ownership. Invest in equity by uplifting historically underrepresented voices and creating inclusive pathways for participation in the district’s cultural and economic life.

Addresses ‘what we heard’ themes of Affordability & Equity

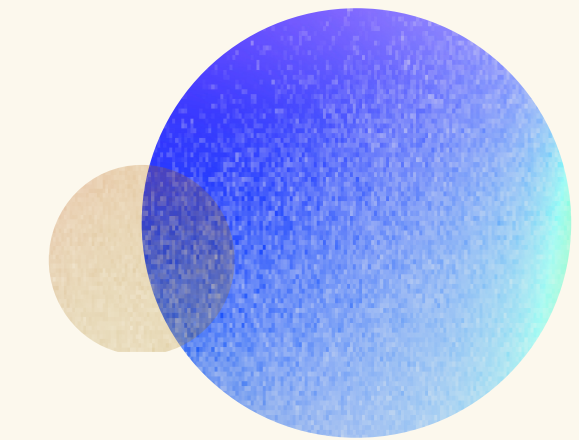
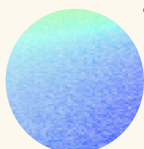


6 Keep RAD Rad

Guide the RAD’s future with clear policy, strong partnerships, and ongoing care to uplift the arts.

Secure the long-term future of the RAD through strong governance, clear policy, and shared responsibility. Use zoning, incentives, and partnerships to prioritize arts and community uses.

Addresses themes of Governance, Policy, & Community Support

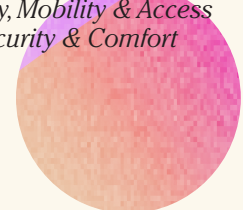


5 Create Everyday Amenities & Connections

Provide the essentials—food, bathrooms, safety, shade, and wayfinding—while ensuring walking, biking, transit, and parking make the district easy to use.

Design the RAD to support daily life as much as special events. Provide safe, reliable basics—public restrooms, shade, seating, lighting, and clean, well-maintained paths. Strengthen walkability, bikeability, and transit connections so residents, artists, and visitors can move easily within the district and to surrounding neighborhoods. Everyday amenities and connections ensure the RAD is welcoming, accessible, and functional for all to gather, create and explore.

Addresses ‘what we heard’ themes of Connectivity, Mobility & Access and Safety, Security & Comfort







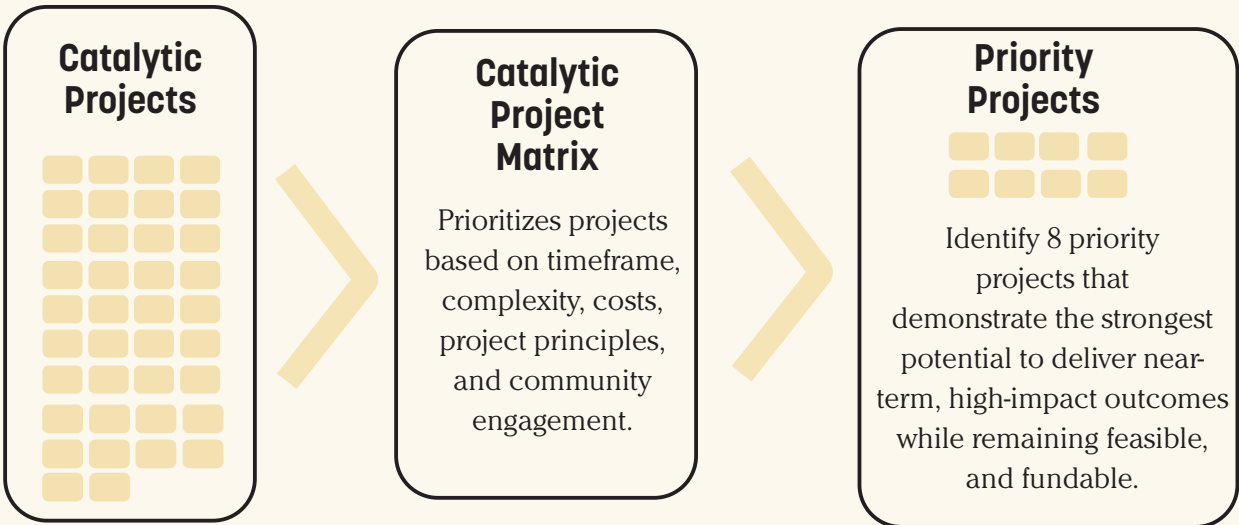
5 Catalytic Projects

Catalytic Projects

A catalytic project is a project that jump-starts positive change in the RAD by showing what’s possible and building momentum for the future. Catalytic projects are designed to be doable, impactful, and inspiring—helping bring the community’s vision to life while encouraging more ideas and investments to follow.

The following thirty-eight catalytic projects were identified through the project’s listening sessions and online survey.

Project Selection Process



Quick Wins

Short-term projects that can be completed in less than a year that will reactivate and connect the RAD, signaling recovery and care of the district.

Creature Comforts

Repair streetscape lighting, provide shaded areas, restrooms, furnishings throughout the district.



Cues to Care

Mow, trim, and weed neglected green spaces, roundabouts, and traffic circles.



Basic River Access

Reestablish safe ways to get down to the river.



Flexible Outdoor Festival/ Market Grounds

Create temporary gathering spaces to program on a regular basis.



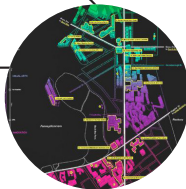
Interactive Art Installations

Encourage visitor participation at key district nodes with public art.



Map & Promote the District

Create an app, district map, and promotional campaign that highlights studios, galleries & businesses.



Open Black Wall Street

Ensure the Black Business Incubator has everything it needs to reopen.



Pop-Up Nature Play

Create kid-friendly installations adjacent to coffee shops and breweries.



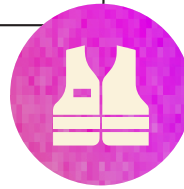
Sculpture Garden

Activate underutilized lots with temporary public art installations.



RAD Ambassadors

Regular bike/ pedestrian patrols to increase district safety.



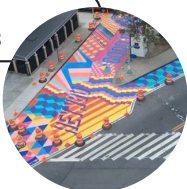
Repair & Maintain

Repair roads and damaged sidewalks, remove remaining debris, and repaint street striping.



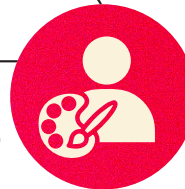
Streetscape Super Graphics

Commission a RAD artist to paint crosswalks, sidewalks, and parking lots with bold murals.



Studio Share Program

Create program to ensure studios throughout the RAD are being utilized to their full capacity.



Temporary Studio Village

Place temporary structures on vacant or underutilized parcels.



Temporary Screening

Screen damaged or vacant property with public art by a commissioned RAD artist.



Educational Riparian Tree Nursery

Anticipate upcoming Greenway repairs by installing temporary tree nurseries.



Next Steps

Projects that can be achieved over the next 1-3 years and require substantial efforts, coordination, and investment.

Art Trail

The RAD Art Trail weaves together murals, sculptures, and creative landmarks to highlight the district's identity and provide visual interest between nodes of activity.



Nasty Branch Stream Restoration

Increase the flood capacity the Nasty Branch tributary while creating a trail system align its banks.



Community Services

Ensure vulnerable community members have access to services, shelter, mental health, and addiction services to foster a safer and more compassionate district for all.

Public Restroom Network

Ensure comfort, accessibility, and dignity for all visitors while encouraging longer stays in the district.



Design & Resilience Standards

To ensure future development maintains the RAD identity, while adapting to flooding and climate challenges.

RAD Marketing Refresh

Refresh the RAD brand to better reflect the district's evolving identity, and unify its diverse community of artists, businesses, and public spaces.

Emergency Response & Resilience Hub

Equip the RAD with evacuation plans, flood warning systems, disaster response procedures, and safe gathering spaces to protect the community and support recovery during floods or

RAD Trolley

Provide a convenient, car-free connection between RAD's nodes to boosting accessibility, reducing parking pressures, and encouraging more visitors to experience the full district.



Establish RAD Cultural Preservation District

Provide dedicated resources to protect the area's creative identity, support local artists and businesses, oversee and maintain district development, implement policies, and ensure its long-term cultural and economic vitality.

Recreation Play Loop

Create recreational amenities for all ages inspired by the spirit of the arts district. Ensure all can participate by providing recreation equipment rentals.



French Broad River Riparian Restoration

Revitalize the river's natural ecology, expand flood capacity, stabilize its banks, and create safer, more accessible spaces for recreation, and community gathering along its banks.



Reopen and Upgrade Boat Ramps & Docks

Provide safe river access, support recreation and tourism. Create a boat house for kayak, canoe, stand up paddle board storage.



Lyman & Depot Street Pedestrian Bridge Feasibility Study

Remove the rail barrier by creating a connection between RAD's biggest pedestrian gap.



Streetscape Upgrades

Add traffic calming, ADA accessibility elements, lighting, green infrastructure stormwater management, dedicated busking areas, metered parking, and protected bike lanes to create complete streets throughout the district.



Big Moves

Bold, visionary initiatives that go beyond incremental improvements—large-scale, transformative investments that would fundamentally reshape the RAD and inspire national attention, and deliver lasting social, economic, and environmental impact.

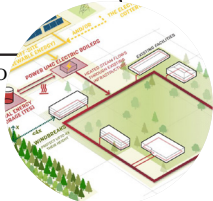
Creative Campus

Sustain the creative community by offering artists affordable places to live, produce, and showcase their work.



District-Wide Renewable Energy

Transform the RAD into a net-zero community powered by solar, micro-hydro, and battery storage systems integrated into rooftops, public spaces, and infrastructure to provide clean, resilient, and affordable energy for all.



Extend the Greenway

Create a continuous corridor to connect RAD to Downtown Asheville, Biltmore Village, West Asheville, and the Woodfin Wave.



Floodplain Re-imagined

Transform the portions of RAD in the flood way into a continuous floodable riverfront park.



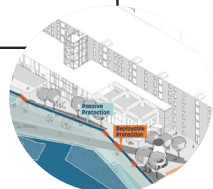
Passenger Rail Station

Provide sustainable regional connectivity, and bring more visitors directly into the heart of the district.



Protect Historic Buildings

Utilize flood walls, berms, and levees to help safeguard the RAD's cultural heritage while reducing flood risk and ensuring these landmarks endure for future generations.



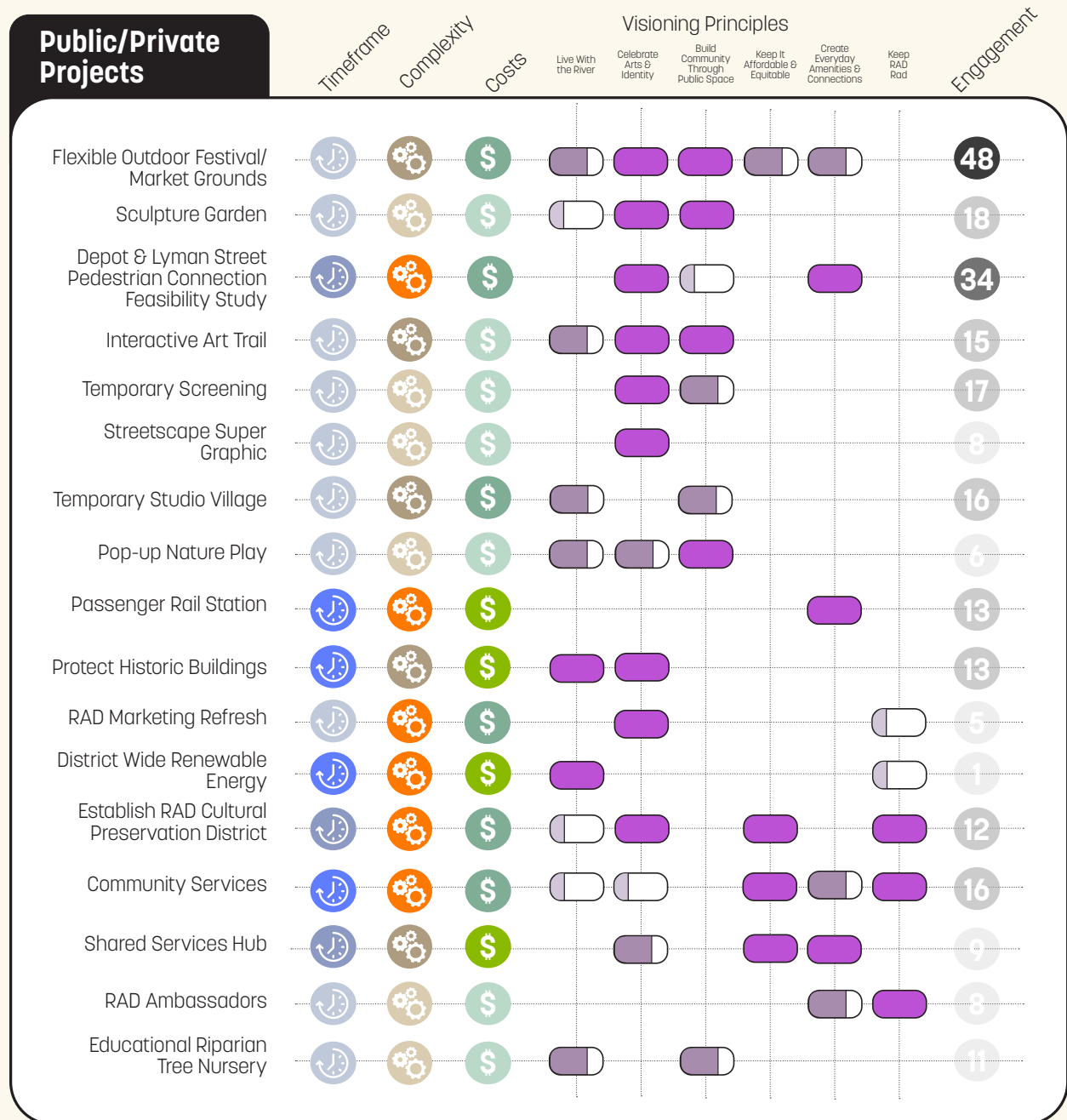
RAD Amphitheater

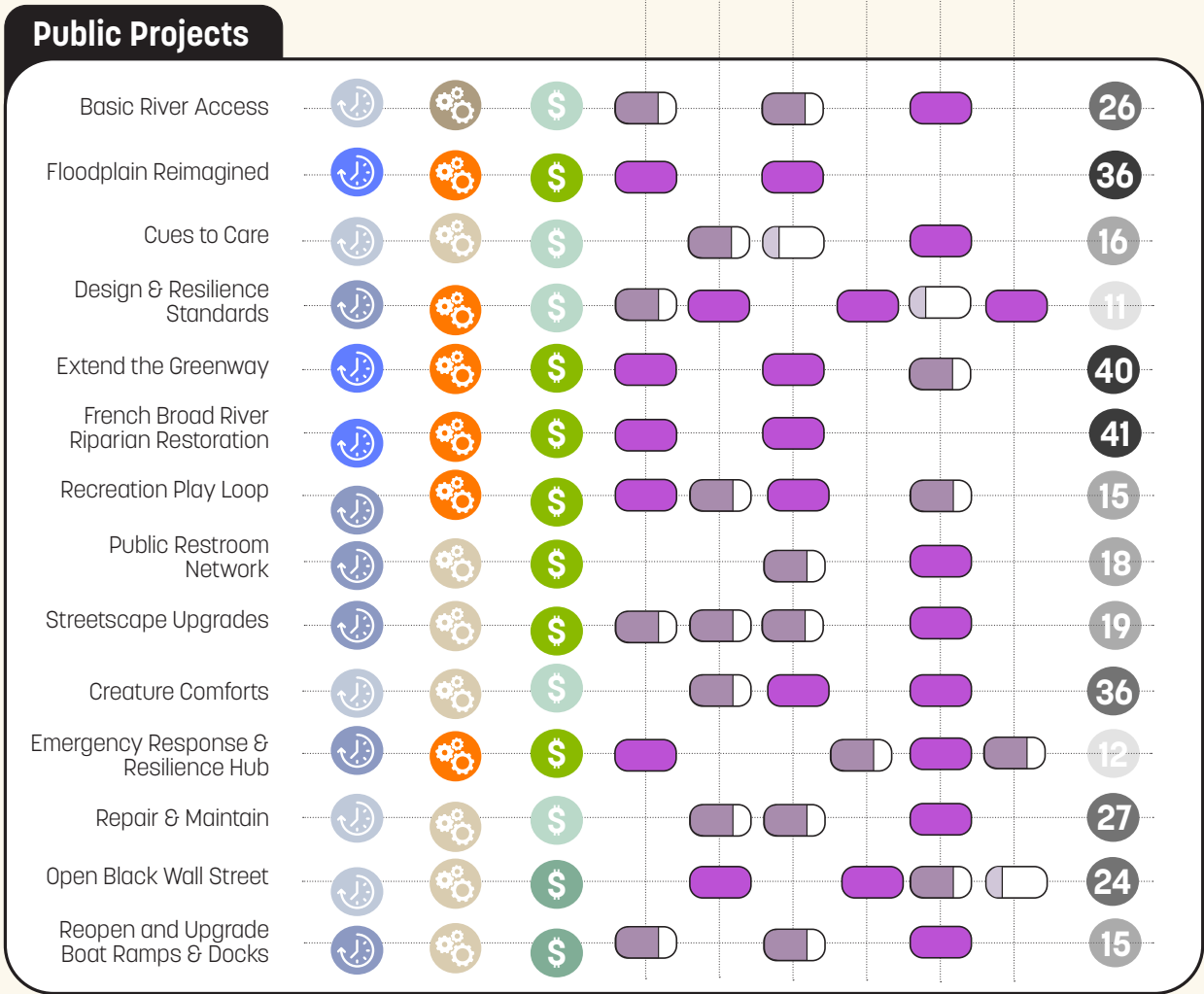
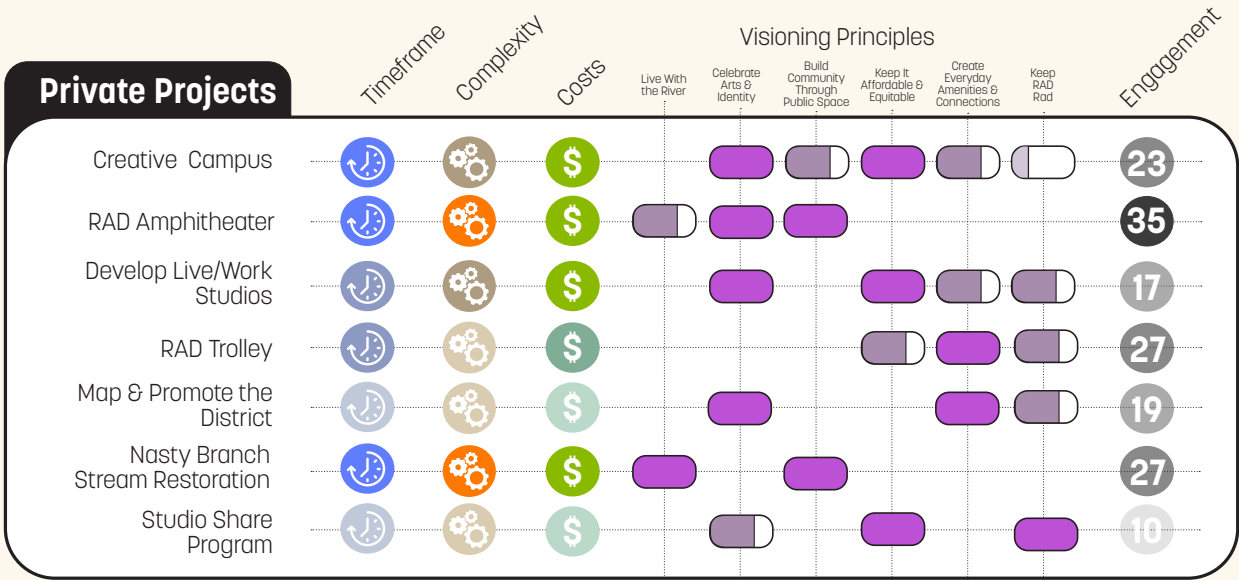
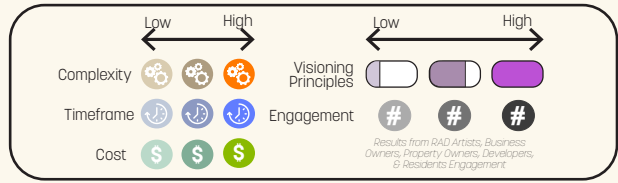
Create an indoor/outdoor music venue and arts pavilion that is flood-tolerant.



Catalytic Project Matrix

The following catalytic project matrix organizes and evaluates the impact potential of each project based on factors such as timeframe, complexity, cost, alignment with project principles, and community prioritization. By comparing projects across these criteria, the matrix helps identify which interventions should be pursued first to build momentum and guide long-term investment in the district.





Flexible Outdoor Festival / Market Grounds

Creating temporary gathering spaces provides flexible venues that can host recurring events and activate the district with floodplain-appropriate programming. These spaces can accommodate craft markets, farmers markets, and live music using elements that are lightweight, movable, and easily set up or taken down in response to weather or river conditions. By activating underutilized areas in this resilient way, the district can support local vendors and artists, strengthen its cultural identity, and foster a vibrant public realm year-round.



Timing

This quick win project can be completed in less than a year.



Complexity

The elements suggested for this temporary event space require standard building permits from local regulatory bodies.



Cost







The cost for the implementation of a temporary event space could range from \$500,000 to \$1,000,000. This does not include land acquisition, design, or management costs.



Space Need

Depending on the scale of programming and anticipated foot traffic, 1-3 acres would be sufficient space for a temporary event space.

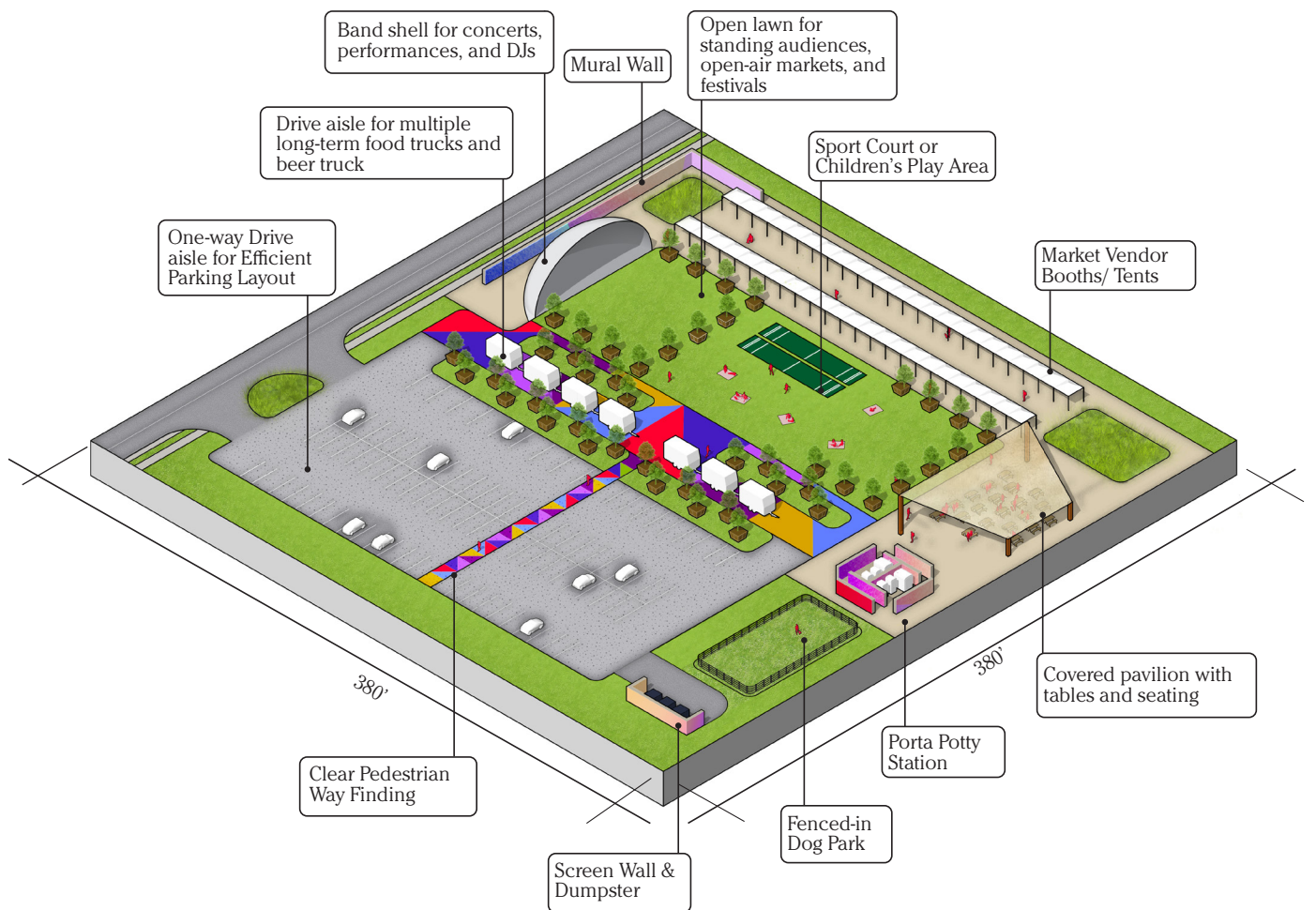
Visioning Principles

-  Live with the River
-  Celebrate Arts & Identity
-  Build Community Through Public Space
-  Keep it Affordable & Equitable
-  Create Everyday Amenities & Connections
-  Keep RAD Rad

Conceptual Layout

Siting Considerations

The event space should be strategically located between active areas of the RAD to strengthen district-wide connectivity and activation. The selected site should accommodate a range of layouts and programming, and be designed to comfortably support intermittent fluctuations in traffic and visitor volume.



Sculpture Garden

Activate underutilized lots through temporary or permanent public art installations. Incorporate interactive art elements or a series of installations designed to attract visitors and encourage movement between key destinations to strengthen connectivity and engagement across the district.



Timing

This **quick win** project can be completed in less than a year.



Complexity

The elements suggested for the sculpture garden may **require standard building permits** from local regulatory bodies.



Cost

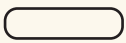
The cost for the implementation of a sculpture garden could range from \$50,000 to \$100,000 depending on design elements. This does not include land acquisition, design, or management



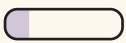
Space Need

A .25- 1 acre would be ample space to host a sculpture garden.

Visioning Principles



Live with the River



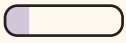
Celebrate Arts & Identity



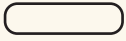
Build Community Through Public Space



Keep it Affordable & Equitable



Create Everyday Amenities & Connections

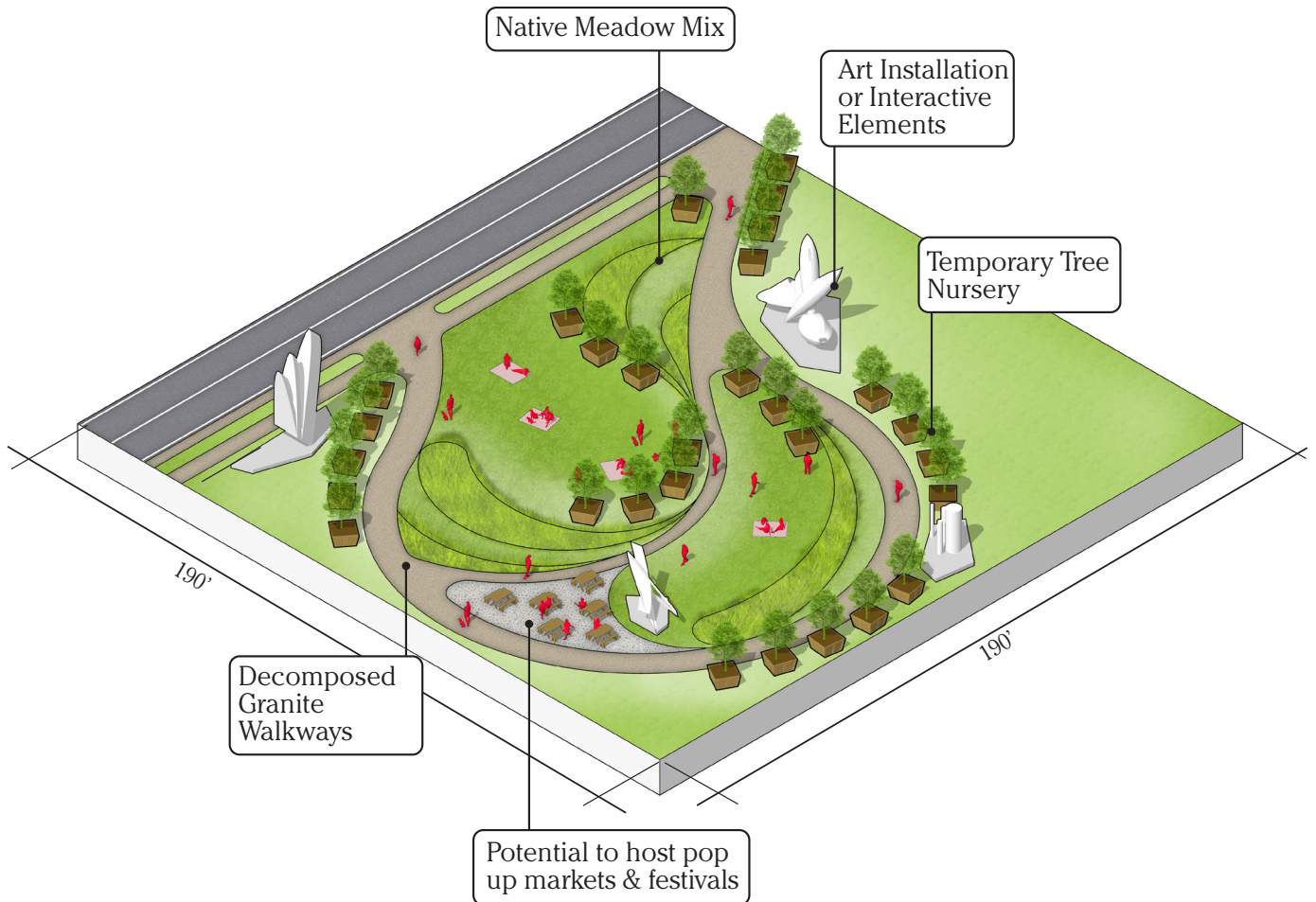


Keep RAD Rad

Conceptual Layout

Siting Considerations

The location of the sculpture garden should be prioritized in lower sections of the RAD. The selected site should allow for clear site lines throughout the garden to ensure user safety.



Depot & Lyman Street Pedestrian Connection Feasibility Study

Explore strategies to cross one of the largest pedestrian gaps in the River Arts District by linking Depot Avenue and Lyman Street across the rail barrier. The study aims to improve safety, accessibility, and connectivity between key cultural and recreational destinations within the district by exploring the feasibility of a below, at-grade, or above ground crossing.



Timing

While a feasibility study would take 4-6 months to complete, the implementation of this effort could take about 2-3 years depending on the preferred direction of the study.



Complexity

Given the number of local, state, and federal agencies, as well as private property owners and rail authorities involved, this effort would be highly complex.



Cost

Based on the findings of the feasibility study, the implementation of this effort could range from \$1 to \$25 Million.



Space Need

A pedestrian connection would need to span approximately 500' to make an east-west connection.

Visioning Principles

- Live with the River
- Celebrate Arts & Identity
- Build Community Through Public Space
- Keep it Affordable & Equitable
- Create Everyday Amenities & Connections
- Keep RAD Rad

Pedestrian Bridge Precedents

Due to safety concerns associated with at-grade crossings and the flooding risks posed by an underpass, a pedestrian bridge may be the safest and most resilient option for connecting the two points within the district. The following projects provide examples of similar scale and site constraints.



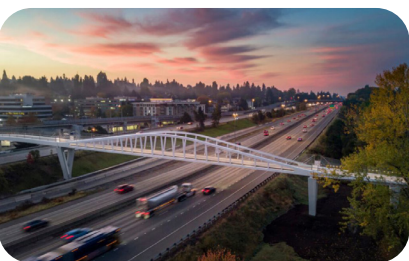
Park Union Bridge
Colorado Springs, CO
Length- 340'

Architect: Diller Scofidio + Renfro



University Gateway Bridge
Pullman, WA
Length- 450'

Architect: LMN Architects



John Lewis Memorial Bridge
Length- 500'
Seattle, WA

Architect: Perkins Eastman

Creative Campus

Develop a Creative Campus that includes subsidized artist studios, co-op galleries, educational classrooms, and an incubator for emerging and underrepresented artists. This hub will serve as a welcoming gateway to the district—showcasing regional artistry, providing visitor information, and celebrating the cultural traditions of the region.



Timing

The development of a creative campus is a large effort. Depending on the scale and the selected program, implementation could range from 1-3 years.



Complexity

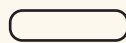





The assumed elements for a creative campus require standard building permits from local regulatory bodies.



Cost

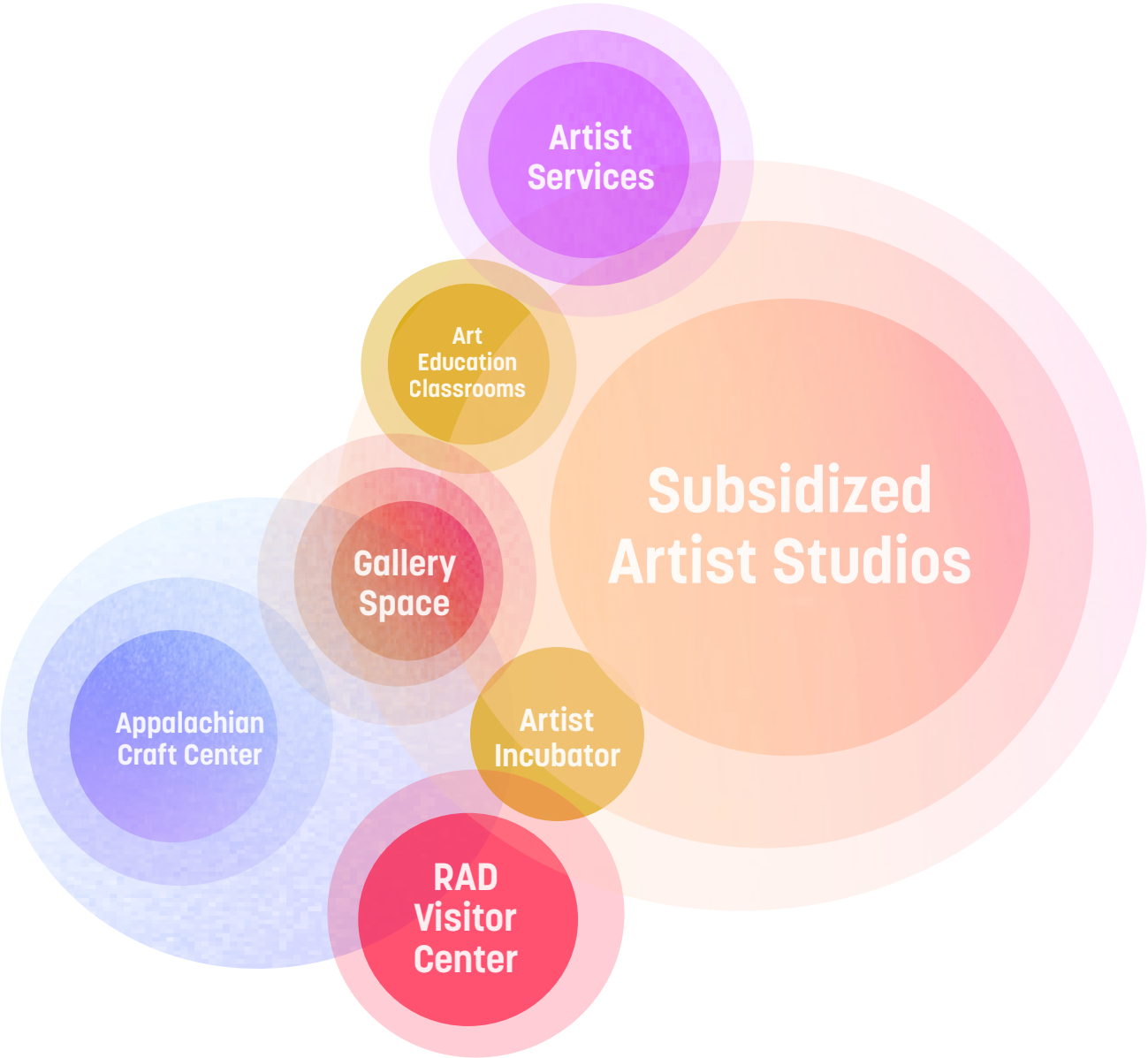
Costs for a creative campus are tied directly to scale and programming. The implementation costs could range from \$10- \$30 Million.

Visioning Principles

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Creative Campus Programming

This programming bubble diagram begins to visualize the Creative Campus, illustrating how artist studios, galleries, classrooms, and an arts incubator relate spatially to one another. The arrangement highlights key adjacencies, positioning welcoming and public-facing spaces toward district gateways while clustering making and learning spaces to support collaboration and shared resources.



Art Trail

The RAD Art Trail weaves together murals, sculptures, and creative landmarks to highlight the district’s identity. Designed as a walkable and bike-friendly route, it connects studios, public spaces, and cultural destinations while encouraging discovery and everyday activation.



Timing

The development of an Art Trail is an effort that may take 1-3 years to plan, develop and coordinate



Complexity

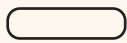
The assumed elements for an Art Trail require standard building permits from local regulatory bodies.



Cost

Costs for the planning, design, coordination, and implementation of an Art Trail could range from \$500,000 - \$1Million depending on the number of trail stops and scale of implemented public art.

Visioning Principles



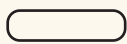
Live with the River



Celebrate Arts & Identity



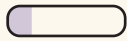
Build Community Through Public Space



Keep it Affordable & Equitable



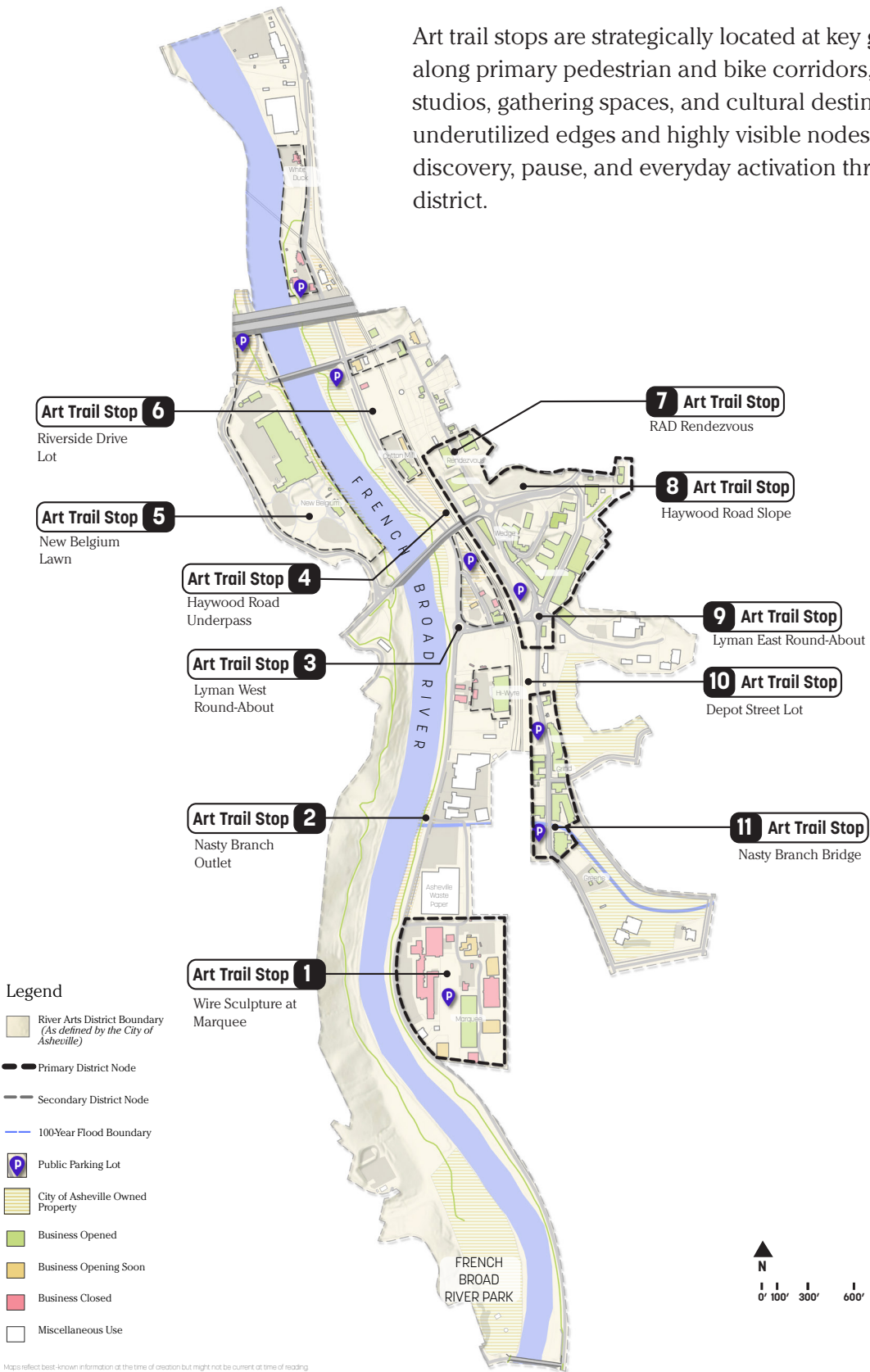
Create Everyday Amenities & Connections



Keep RAD Rad

Potential Art Trail Stops

Art trail stops are strategically located at key gateways, along primary pedestrian and bike corridors, and near studios, gathering spaces, and cultural destinations—using underutilized edges and highly visible nodes to invite discovery, pause, and everyday activation throughout the district.



Maps reflect best-known information at the time of creation but might not be current at time of reading.

Temporary Screening

Screening damaged or vacant property with public art by a commissioned RAD artist transforms underutilized or visually disruptive sites into meaningful community assets. This approach not only beautifies the area, but also celebrates local creativity and reinforces the district’s identity as a center for arts and culture. By providing artists with opportunities to showcase their work in prominent locations, these installations can spark interest, draw visitors, and catalyze further investment in the surrounding area.



Timing

The planning, coordination, and implementation of temporary screening should take less than 6 months.



Complexity






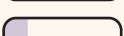
The project will require some coordination between land owners, non-profit partners, artists, and minor approval from city departments.



Cost

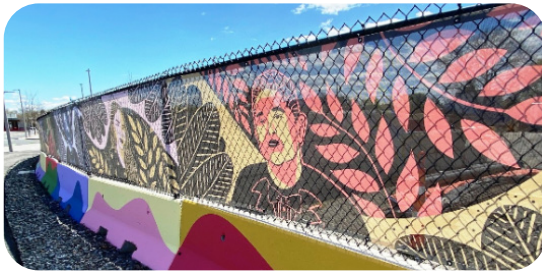
Depending on the scale and number of installations, temporary screening should cost under \$100,000.

Visioning Principles

-  Live with the River
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-  Build Community Through Public Space
-  Keep it Affordable & Equitable
-  Create Everyday Amenities & Connections
-  Keep RAD Rad

Screening Examples

Temporary screening is constructed from lightweight, modular materials such as plywood panels, metal mesh, scaffold framing, or removable fencing systems that can be easily installed, adapted, or relocated. Finishes—including exterior-grade paints, printed wraps, and sealants—are selected for durability, ease of maintenance, and compatibility with public art installations, allowing the screens to function as both protective barriers and flexible canvases for artistic expression.



Educational Riparian Tree Nursery

Anticipating upcoming Greenway repairs by installing temporary tree and riparian plant nurseries allows the site to remain active, ecologically productive, and supportive of future restoration during construction. These nurseries can supply mature trees and native riparian species for replanting along the Greenway, reducing long-term costs and ensuring immediate habitat and canopy benefits once repairs are complete. Educational signage can further enhance the temporary installation by teaching visitors about native ecology, flood resilience, and the role of riparian landscapes in supporting a healthy river system.



Timing

The planning and implementation of a tree nursery should take less than 6 months.



Complexity


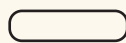



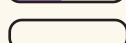
The tree nursery requires minimal tree health management and watering to ensure success.



Cost

Depending on the size and scale of the tree nursery, installation should cost from \$10,000 to \$100,000.

Visioning Principles

-  Live with the River
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-  Keep RAD Rad

Educational Riparian Tree Nursery Benefits

Community, Education & Visibility

Visible commitment to restoration:

On-site nurseries make ecological investment tangible and legible to the public.

Hands-on engagement opportunities:

Can support volunteer days, school programs, artist collaborations, or interpretive signage.

Short-term use of underutilized land:

Activates vacant or transitional areas without permanent infrastructure.

Ecological & Performance Benefits

Higher plant survival rates: Growing trees and shrubs on-site allows plants to acclimate to local soils, hydrology, and microclimates before installation.

Right plant, right time: Stock can be held and planted during optimal seasonal or post-flood windows rather than rushed to meet delivery schedules.

Improved species selection: Enables testing and refining species mixes based on observed performance before large-scale planting.

Resilience & Floodplain Compatibility

Flood-resilient infrastructure: Temporary nurseries use lightweight, movable systems (gravel beds, containers, live

stakes) that can be removed or reset after flood events.

Supports phased restoration: Allows gradual riparian establishment that aligns with evolving river conditions, construction phases, or adaptive management strategies.

Logistical & Cost Advantages

Reduced transport and replacement costs: Minimizes plant loss from long-distance shipping and decreases the need for reorders.

Flexible scheduling: Plants can be grown ahead of funding or construction timelines and deployed as opportunities arise.

Efficient staging: Serves as a nearby holding area for live stakes, whips, and container stock during installation.

Adaptability & Legacy

Temporary by design: Infrastructure can be removed once planting goals are met, leaving no long-term footprint.

Scalable model: Nursery space can expand, contract, or relocate as restoration priorities shift.

Pop-up Nature Play

Creating kid-friendly installations adjacent to coffee shops and breweries offers families welcoming spaces to gather, play, and spend more time in the district. These installations can include interactive art, small play features, or creative seating elements that are safe, durable, and floodplain-appropriate. By encouraging multi-generational activity, these features help support local businesses, enhance the district's sense of community, and contribute to a more vibrant and inclusive public realm.



Timing

The implementation of a pop-up nature play area should take less than a year.



Complexity

When implementing a play area, private land owners should install safety and usage signage.



Cost

Depending on the size, scale, and material selection of the pop-up nature play area, project cost should be less than \$50,000.

Visioning Principles



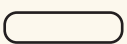
Live with the River



Celebrate Arts & Identity



Build Community Through Public Space



Keep it Affordable & Equitable



Create Everyday Amenities & Connections



Keep RAD Rad

Pop-Up Play Precedents

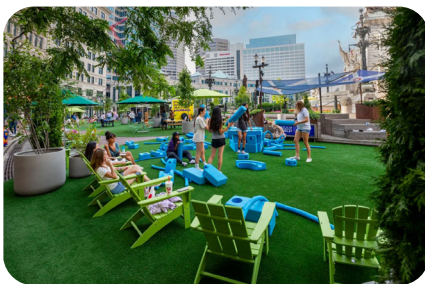
The three precedent projects below utilize temporary placemaking techniques and play elements to activate underutilized open spaces. Through tactile materials, interactive installations, and low-cost, flexible interventions, these projects encourage curiosity, informal gathering, and repeat visitation.



Wild Woods Nature Discovery Area
Boulder, CO



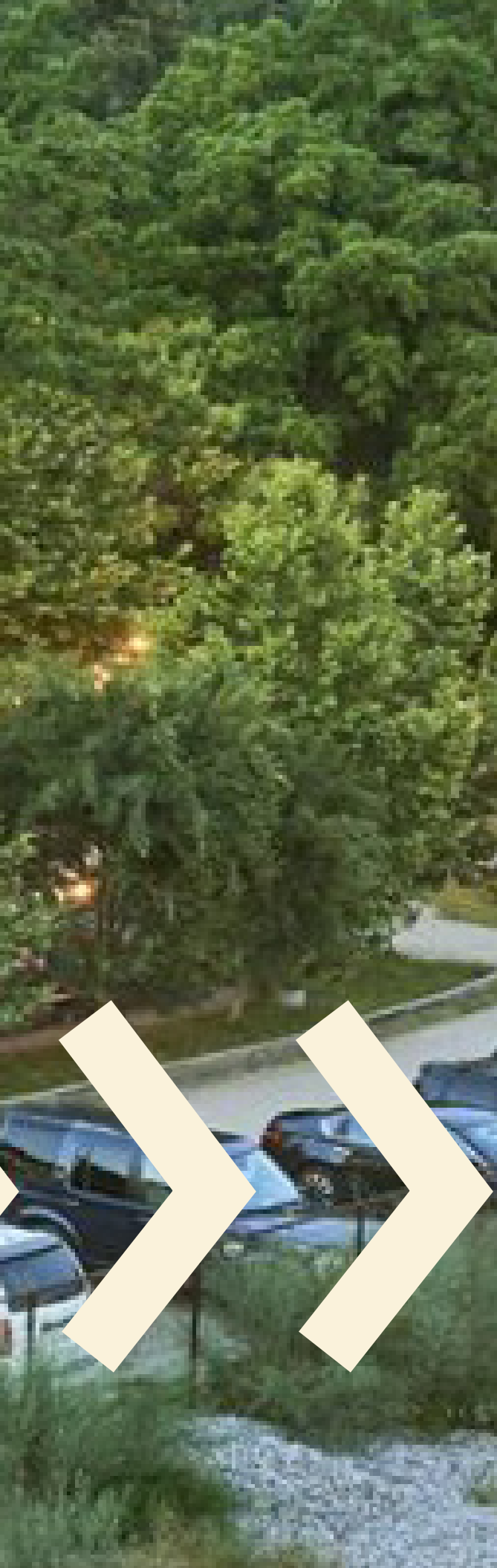
Lawn on D
Boston, MA



Monument Circle
Indianapolis, IN



WEDGE



6 Looking Ahead

RESILIENT RAMP

Community-led Visioning & Planning
for the River Arts District



What We Heard

Themes from our project engagement

Flood Resilience & Riverfront Ecology

"We need to respect what the river wants to do... give her the space"

2 Affordability & Equity

"We need to respect what the river wants to do... give her the space"

1,155
Survey
Submissions

3 Parks, Green Space & Recreation

"Enhance the parks that already exist and turn them into different types of parks"

6 Connectivity, Mobility & Access

"Improve the way we get around the district"

100+

4 Everyday Amenities & Core Infrastructure

"Improve the way we get around the district"

5 Safety, Security & Comfort

"Improve the way we get around the district"

8 Governance, Policy & Community Support

"Improve the way we get around the district"



Looking Ahead

The River Arts District stands at a pivotal moment shaped by profound loss, sustained by deep community pride, and guided by a shared commitment to resilience, creativity, and care. This visioning effort affirms that recovery in the RAD is not about returning to what once was, but about intentionally shaping what comes next: a district that lives with the river, centers artists and culture, and adapts to a changing climate while remaining unmistakably Asheville.

The work documented in this report provides a clear and actionable framework for moving forward. Grounded in extensive community engagement, it translates lived experience, site analysis, and collective priorities into a set of guiding principles and catalytic projects that can be pursued across near-, mid-, and long-term horizons. Together, these strategies offer a roadmap for rebuilding the district in ways that reduce risk, strengthen ecological systems, and support a thriving creative economy. Importantly, they balance immediate needs—such as safety, access, and reactivation—with bold, long-term investments that can transform the RAD into a national model for arts-led, flood-resilient recovery.

Looking ahead, implementation will require continued collaboration among artists, residents, business owners, property owners, nonprofit partners, and public agencies. The success of this vision depends on sustained leadership, clear governance, and the ability to leverage diverse funding sources while remaining grounded in community values. Early “quick win” projects can build momentum and signal care, while more complex initiatives will demand patience, coordination, and long-term commitment. This phased approach allows the district to move forward deliberately—learning, adapting, and strengthening partnerships along the way.

Most importantly, the RAD’s future must remain rooted in the people who define it. By prioritizing affordability, equity, and access; by honoring the district’s layered histories and creative spirit; and by embracing the river as both an asset and a force to respect, the RAD can emerge from this moment more resilient, inclusive, and connected than ever before. This document is not an endpoint, but a living guide—intended to inform decision-making, inspire action, and support the community as it continues the work of rebuilding, healing, and imagining a vibrant future together.

