

Strong Towns Curbside Chat

Norm Van Eeden Petersman
Member Advocate for Strong Towns

A man with a mustache and glasses, wearing a plaid shirt, is focused on working with a small object in his hands in a cluttered workshop. The background is filled with various tools and materials on shelves.

Tim's Question

Is Strong Towns a cult?

Tim's Projects



Conserve Scarce Resources

Tim's Projects



Private investment to build wealth

Tim's Projects

A photograph of a small, green metal building with a white roof, situated on a grassy hill. The building has a green door and a white-framed window. A set of stairs with metal railings leads up to the building. The background shows a line of trees and a snowy area. The sky is overcast.

Use scarce (public) resources wisely

Tim's Projects



Public investment to build wealth

A photograph of an elderly man with a mustache and glasses, wearing a plaid shirt, working in a cluttered workshop. He is focused on a small object in his hands. The background is filled with various tools and materials on shelves.

Tim's Contention

“We have lost sight of what it takes to build enduring prosperity”



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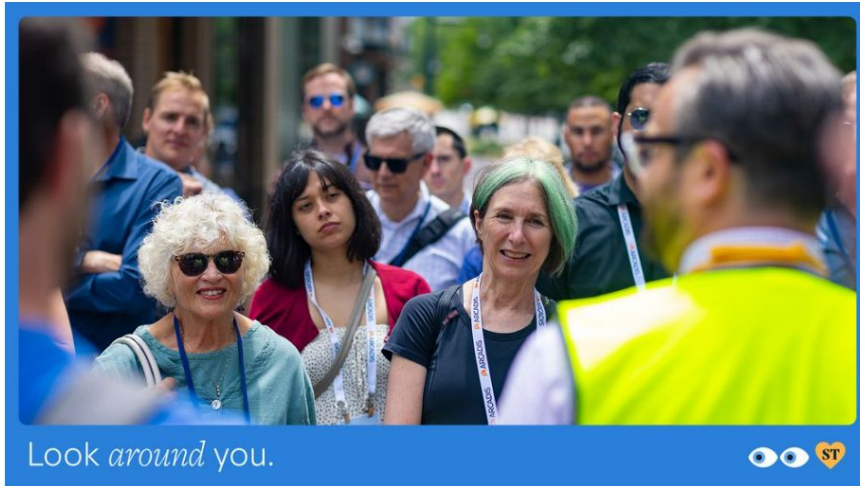
The Problem With Where You Live

When you look around you, it's easy to see all the problems in your place. All the work yet to be done. But, look again: you'll also see the work that is *currently* underway to make a change for the better.

[Read More](#) →

Norman Van Eeden Petersman ·

Jun 12, 2023



Community Action Lab 2024 Applications Are Now Open

Bring your town together for 24 months of coaching, training, and impactful public events.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Trending

PREMISE

Our current path, meant as a means of securing prosperity for all, has unwittingly trapped us in a system that is incapable of building lasting prosperity



PROMISE

**A local path to gradually restore
the capacity to create and sustain
local prosperity**

PREDICAMENT

While we mobilize, we will seemingly be part of a worsening problem and the promised relief won't immediately materialize



A night sky with a dark blue background, filled with numerous small white stars. A bright, multi-pointed star is visible on the right side. A long, thin, white streak, resembling a comet or meteor, curves across the sky from the upper left towards the bright star. In the lower left, the dark silhouettes of evergreen trees are visible against the sky.

NORTH STAR

**The traditional development pattern
offers a reliable path to freedom
from the trouble we've gotten into**

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Salt Lake City, Utah, showing a mix of residential and commercial buildings. The foreground is dominated by dense trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green. In the middle ground, several multi-story buildings are visible, including a prominent brick building and a taller, modern structure. A tall, thin tower stands out against the sky. The background shows rolling hills under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

Strong Towns Curbside Chat

**What have we done?
What do we do?
What can change first?**

Norm Van Eeden Petersman
Member Advocate for Strong Towns



Strong Towns Curbside Chat

**What have we done?
*We have traded a
robust incremental
approach for a
complicated and
fragile pattern of
suburban-style
development***

Norm Van Eeden Petersman
Member Advocate for Strong Towns

Complex, Adaptive Systems







Complex



Complicated



Complex



Complicated

TRADING COMPLEXITY AND ADAPTABILITY FOR GROWTH AND PREDICTABILITY

**Policy, subsidies, and a flurry of
construction resulted in a dramatically
simplified method of building out cities
(the Suburban Experiment)**



Complex



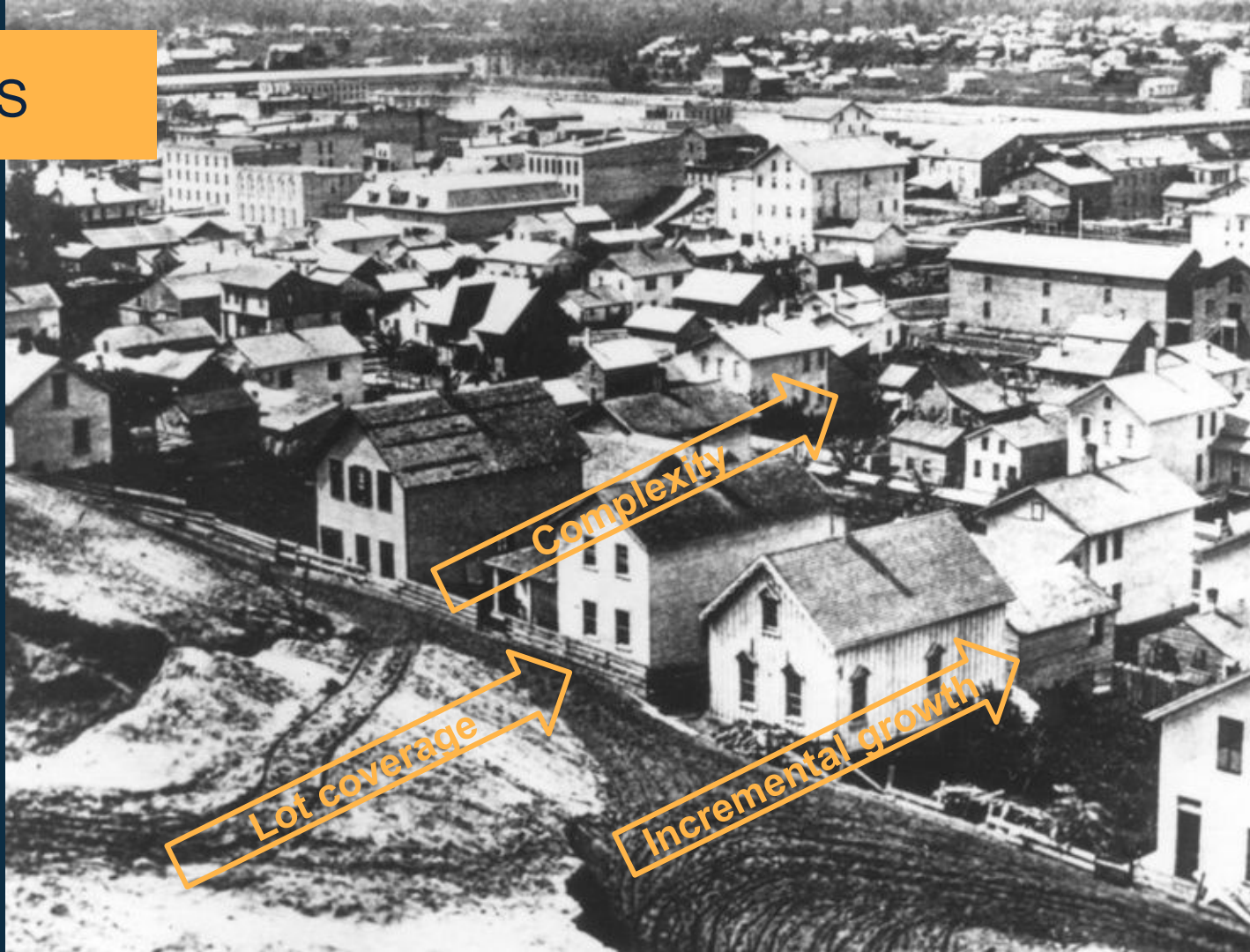
Complicated

GRAND RAPIDS

1870s

Notice the mix
of sizes & uses

1. Complexity
2. Lot coverage
3. Incremental growth & adaptation



Medicine Hat

Present

Notice the mix
of sizes & uses

1. Complexity
2. Lot coverage
3. Incremental growth & adaptation





Strong Towns Curbside Chat

**What have we done?
*We have traded a
viable but incremental
approach for an
approach that suits
the growth machine***

Norm Van Eeden Petersman
Member Advocate for Strong Towns

QUANTUM THEORY FOR CITIES?



Local Street Project

Road Improvement Project

- \$6,600 cost per property
- 50% of costs assessed
- 37 years to recoup public contribution from adjoining tax base



Local Road Rehabilitation

Road Maintenance Project

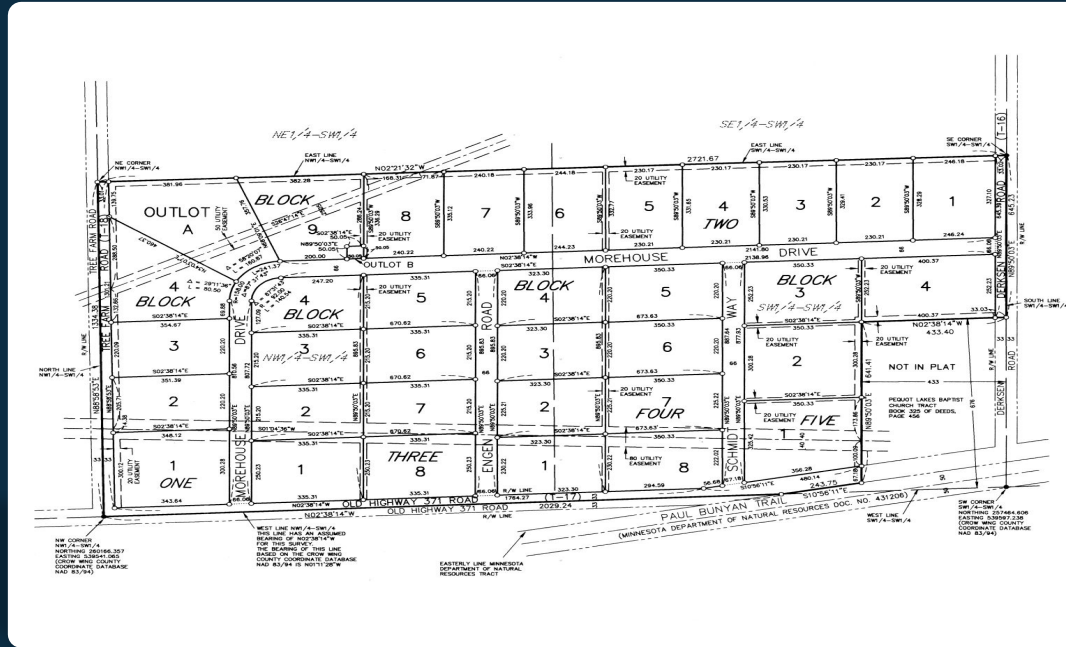
- \$354,000 total cost
- 79 years to recoup public expense from tax base
- To break even requires a 46% increase in property tax rates



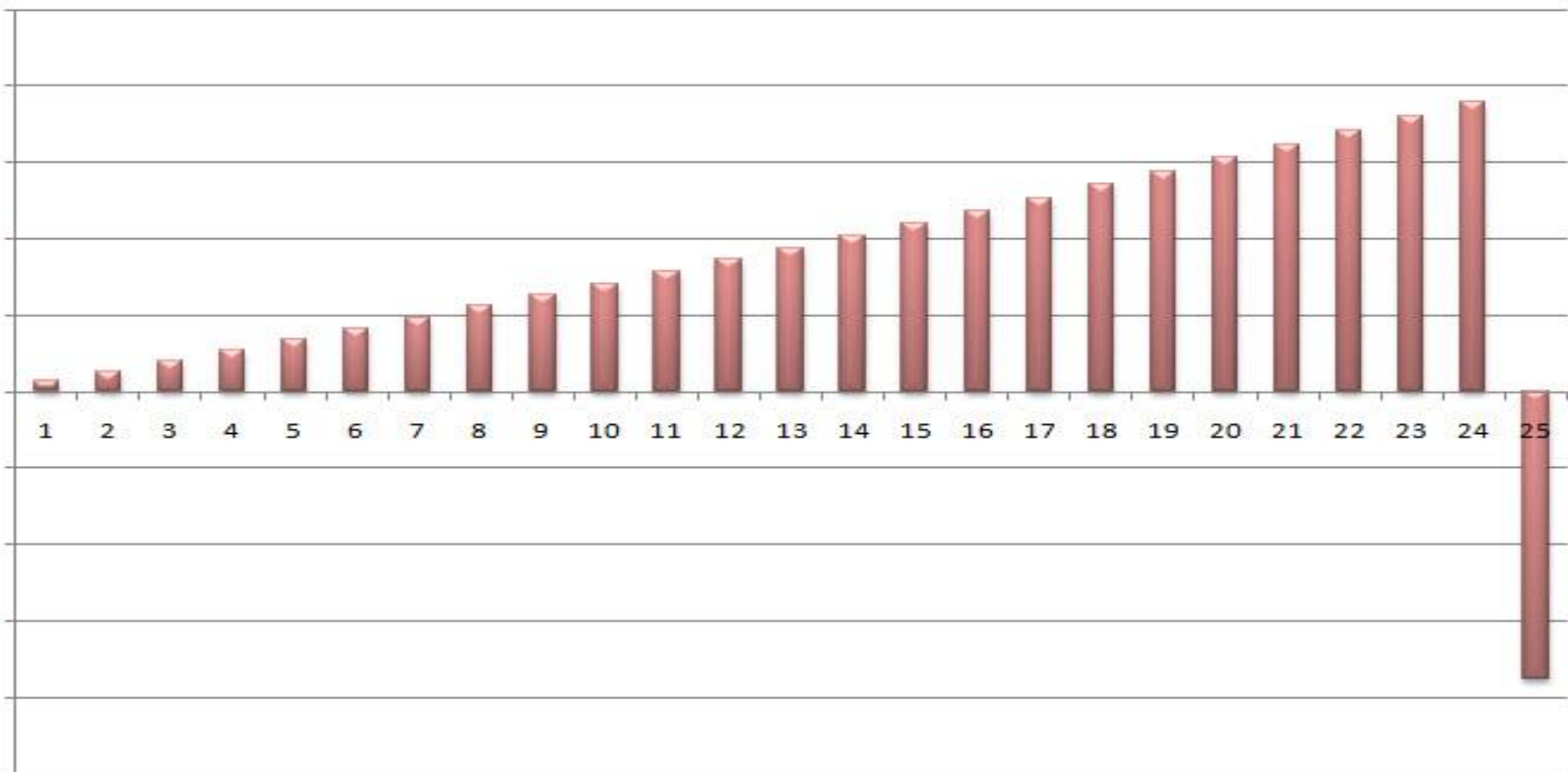
Industrial Development

Industrial Park Development

- \$2.1 million inflation-adjusted total cost
- \$6.6 million in improvements induced
- Payback from current conditions happens in 29 years if all revenue devoted only to debt

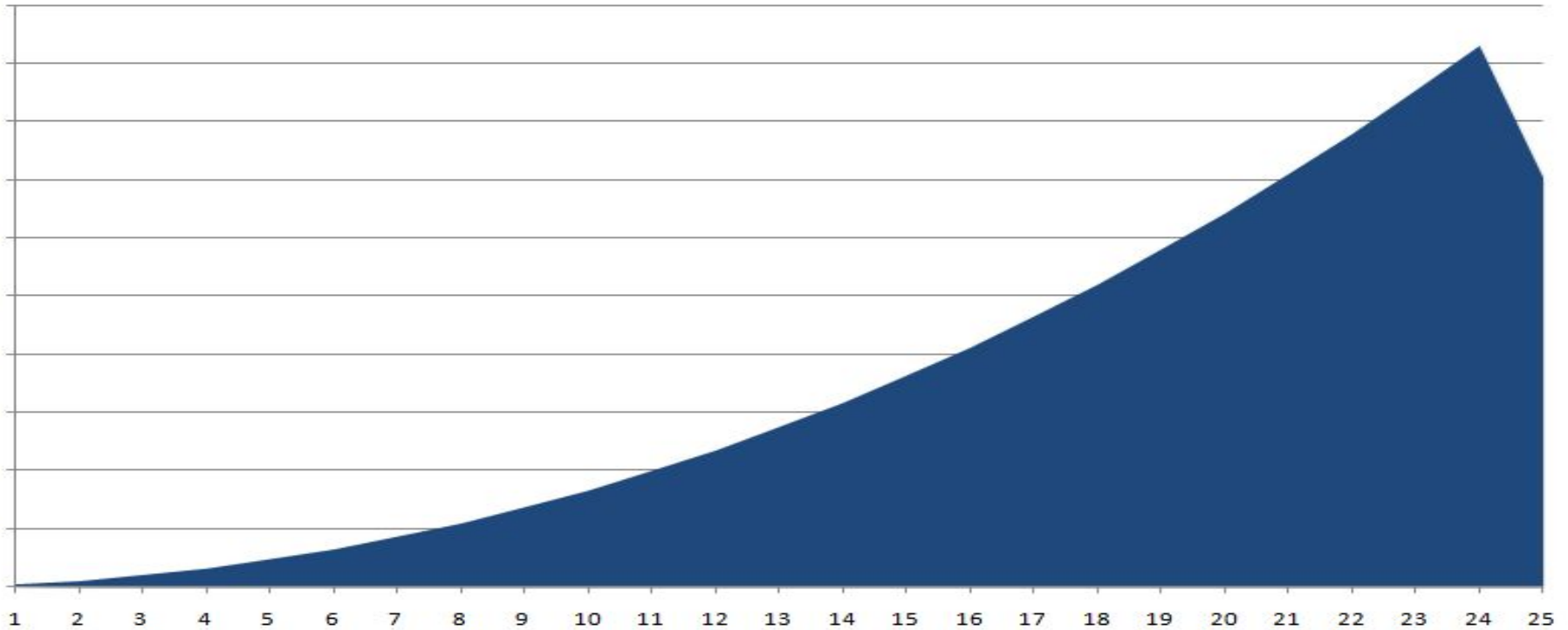


Cumulative Cash Flow - One Life Cycle



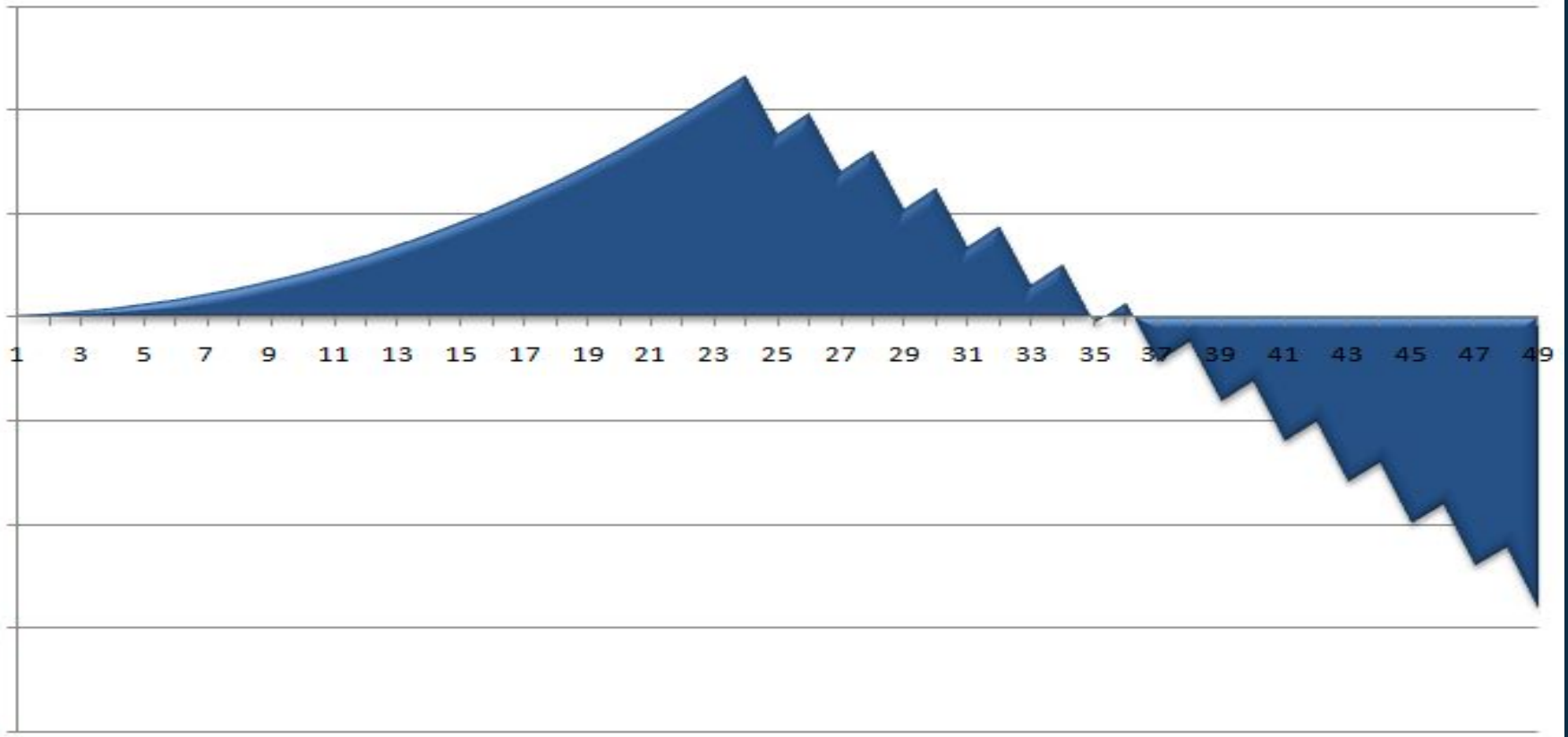
Growth Ponzi Scheme

Cumulative Cash Flow - Multiple Projects



Growth Ponzi Scheme

Cumulative Cash Flow - Two Life Cycles



Growth Ponzi Scheme

POWERFUL INCENTIVES

INITIAL COST TO THE PUBLIC FOR NEW
GROWTH: MINIMAL

BENEFIT TO THE PUBLIC BUDGET FOR NEW
GROWTH: SUBSTANTIAL

THE *CATCH* IS THAT THE PUBLIC AGREES TO
MAINTAIN THE IMPROVEMENT FOREVER

WHAT DID TIM'S SON ADD TO THE COMMUNITY?

INITIAL COST TO THE PUBLIC FOR NEW GROWTH:
MINIMAL

(grants from other levels of government, borrowing with bonds, developer-contributed infrastructure)

BENEFIT TO THE PUBLIC BUDGET FOR NEW GROWTH:
SUBSTANTIAL

("shovel-ready" projects, jobs (!), big contractors coming to town, new tax-paying neighbourhoods)

THE *CATCH* IS THAT THE PUBLIC AGREES TO MAINTAIN THE IMPROVEMENT FOREVER

CORE ASSUMPTIONS FOR THIS STRATEGY

EITHER GROWTH CONTINUES AT EVER
ACCELERATING RATES,

OR

THE PATTERN OF DEVELOPMENT ULTIMATELY
GENERATES MORE REVENUE THAN IT COSTS TO
MAINTAIN



Population



Feet of pipe/person



Fire Hydrants/1,000 people

1949
33,500



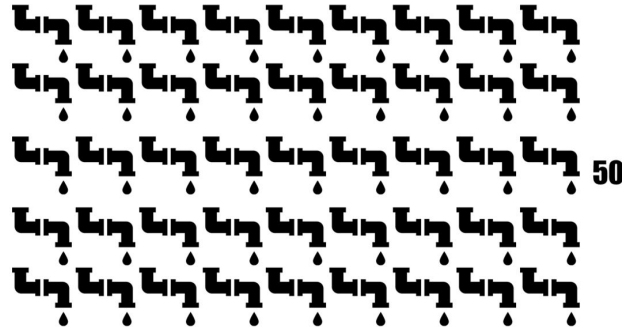
5



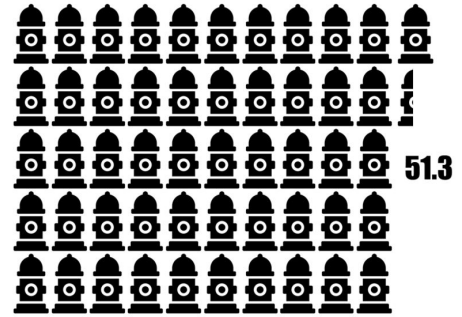
2.4

Source: Sanborn Maps and LCG Records

2015
121,000



50



51.3



3.5x

10x

21.4x

Implications

Serious implications for the future

- The “Mechanisms of Growth” we have become accustomed to are waning.
- Local governments are going to be forced to absorb the local costs of the current development pattern.
- This can't be done in the current pattern of development without **large tax increases** and/or **large cuts in services.**

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Salt Lake City, Utah, showing a mix of residential and commercial buildings. The foreground is dominated by dense trees with vibrant yellow and orange autumn foliage. In the middle ground, several multi-story buildings are visible, including a prominent brick building and a taller, modern structure. A tall communication tower stands out against the sky. The background shows rolling hills under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

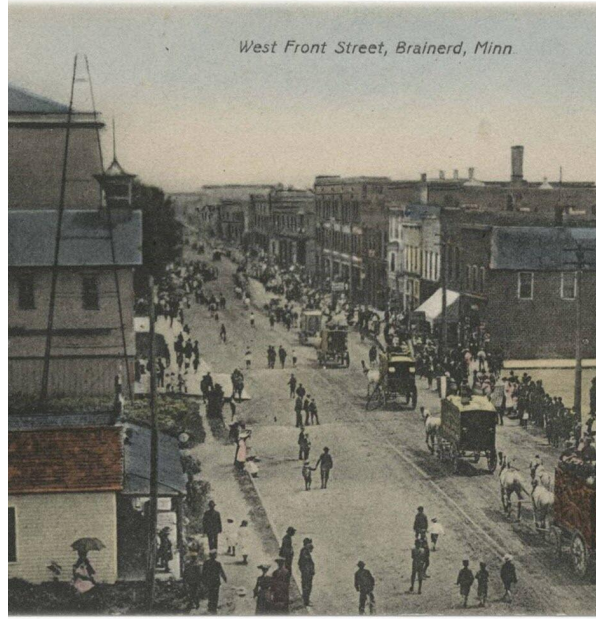
Strong Towns Curbside Chat

~~What have we done?~~

What do we do?

What can change first?

Norm Van Eeden Petersman
Member Advocate for Strong Towns



Allow the Next Increment “By Right”

- a minimum amount of regulatory friction to increase housing density
- approval to build to next increment OR seek permission to skip increments

A black and white photograph of a city street scene. On the left, there are trees and a sidewalk. On the right, there is a large, multi-story building with many windows. The image is slightly blurred, giving it a sense of movement or a candid shot.

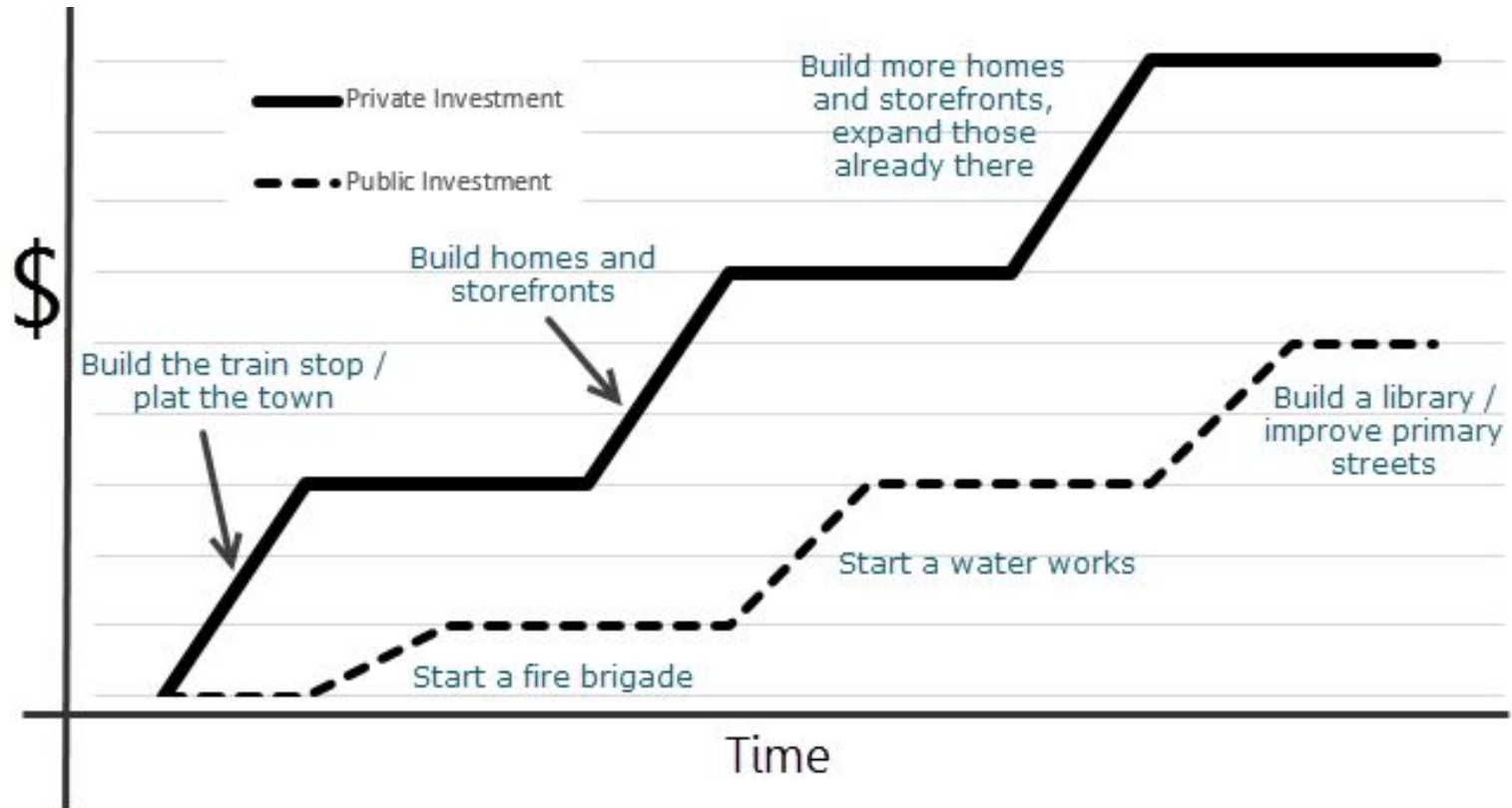
CORE PRINCIPLE

**No neighborhood should be
subject to radical change**

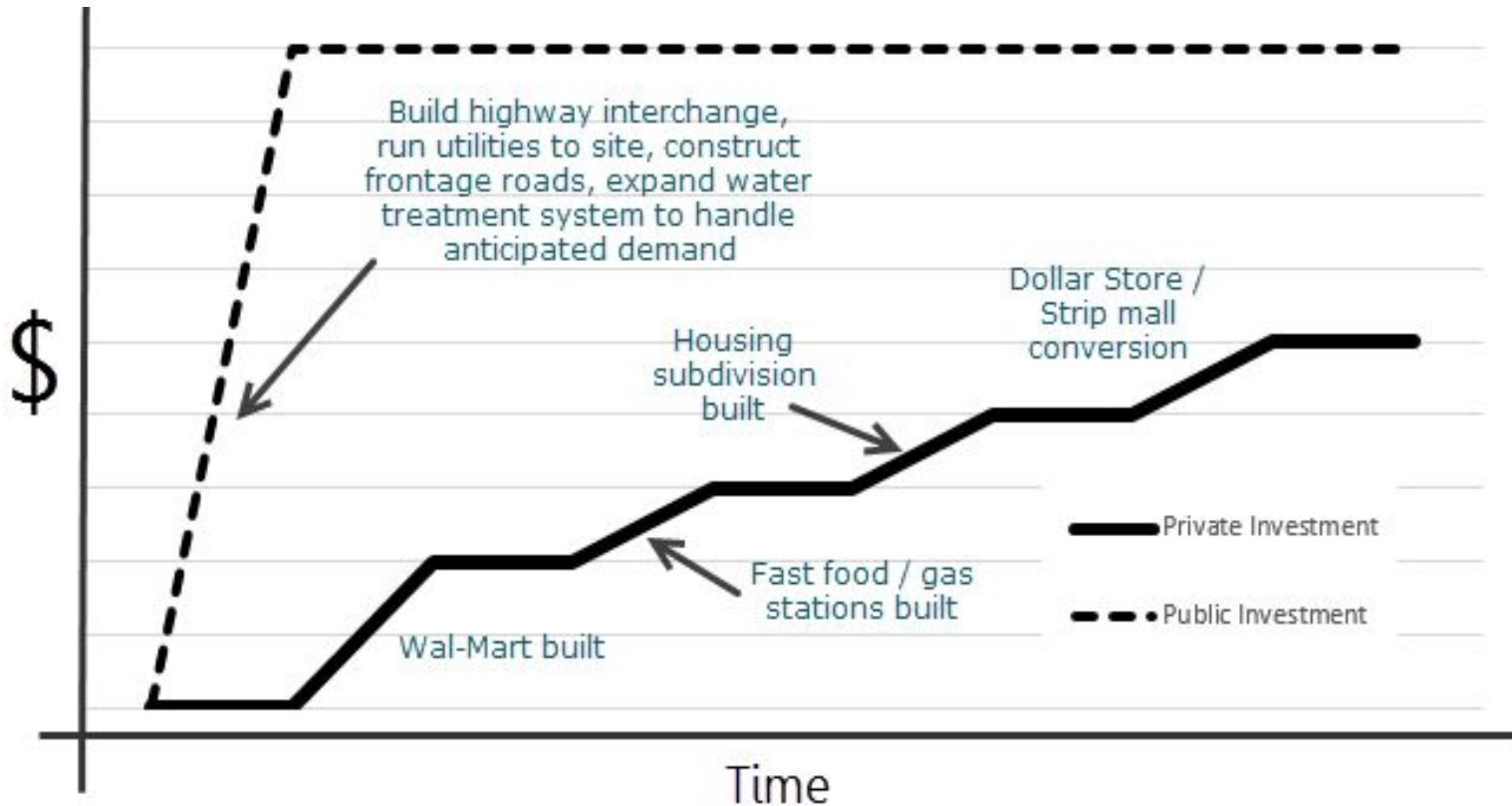
**No neighborhood should be
exempt from change**



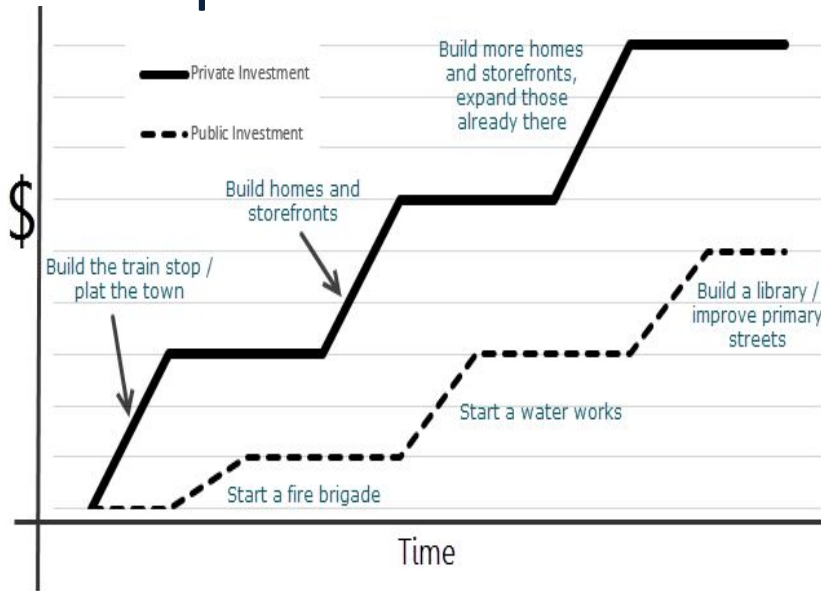
Traditional Development Pattern



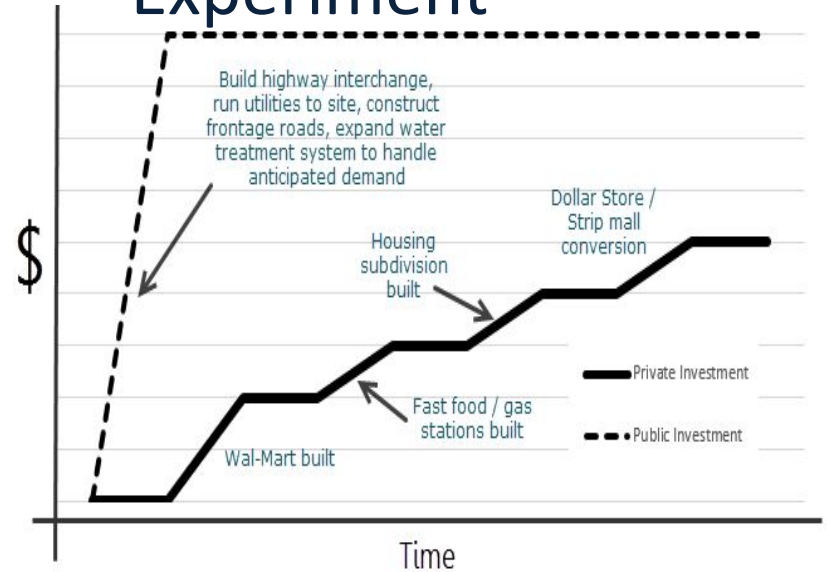
Suburban Experiment

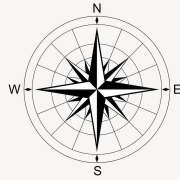


Traditional Development Pattern



Suburban Experiment





NORTH STAR

**The traditional development pattern
offers a reliable path to freedom
from the trouble we've gotten into**

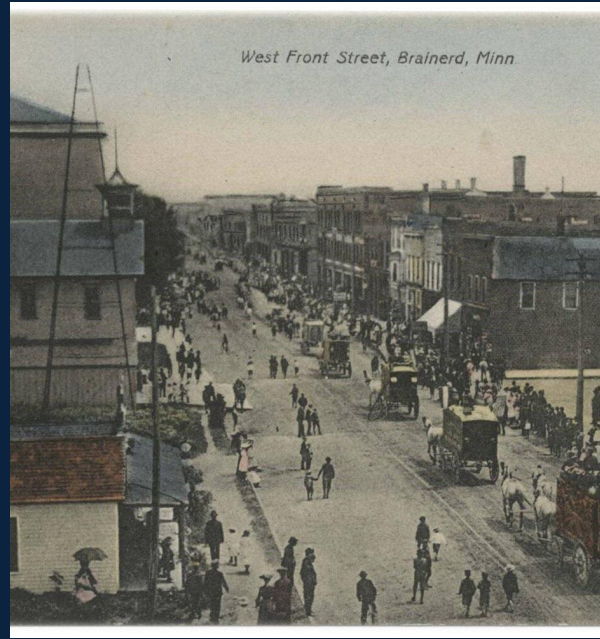
LOWER THE BAR OF ENTRY



“This is the building block or ladder of prosperity and we've taken that lower rung off”

LOWER THE BAR OF ENTRY





Allow the Next Increment “By Right”

- a minimum amount of regulatory friction to increase housing density
- approval to build to next increment OR seek permission to skip increments

EMBRACE ADUs (even if AirBnB)



LOWER MINIMUM LOT SIZES



ALLOW RESIDENTIAL IN “COMMERCIAL” AREAS



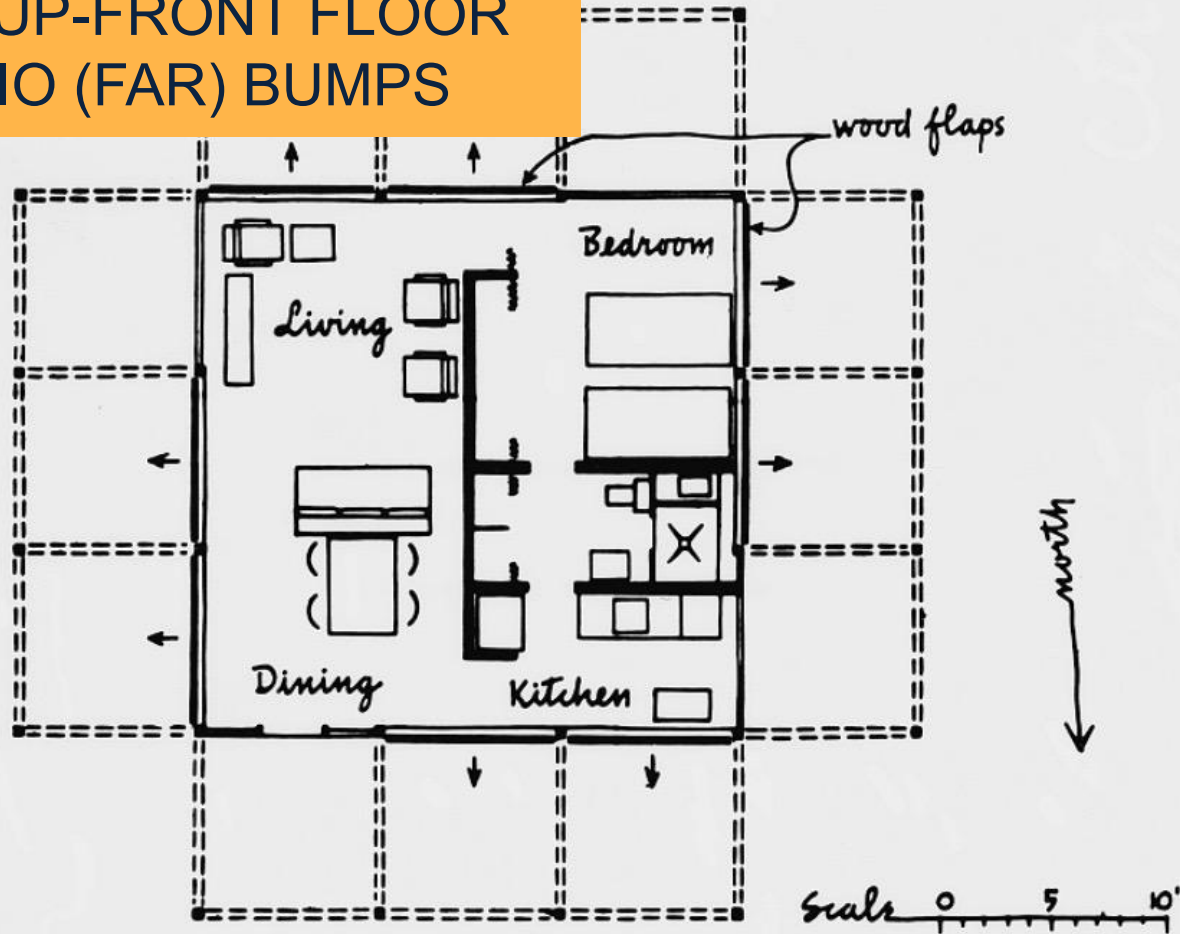
ALLOW COMMERCIAL IN “RESIDENTIAL” AREAS



REDUCE “DISCRETIONARY” REVIEWS WITH AS-OF-RIGHT



PROVIDE UP-FRONT FLOOR AREA RATIO (FAR) BUMPS



LETHBRIDGE, AB



©2022 Google



WASHINGTON, DC



The Bonéval, Capitol Hill, Washington, DC

Photo by Anthony Catania

Design by Torti Gallas & Partners

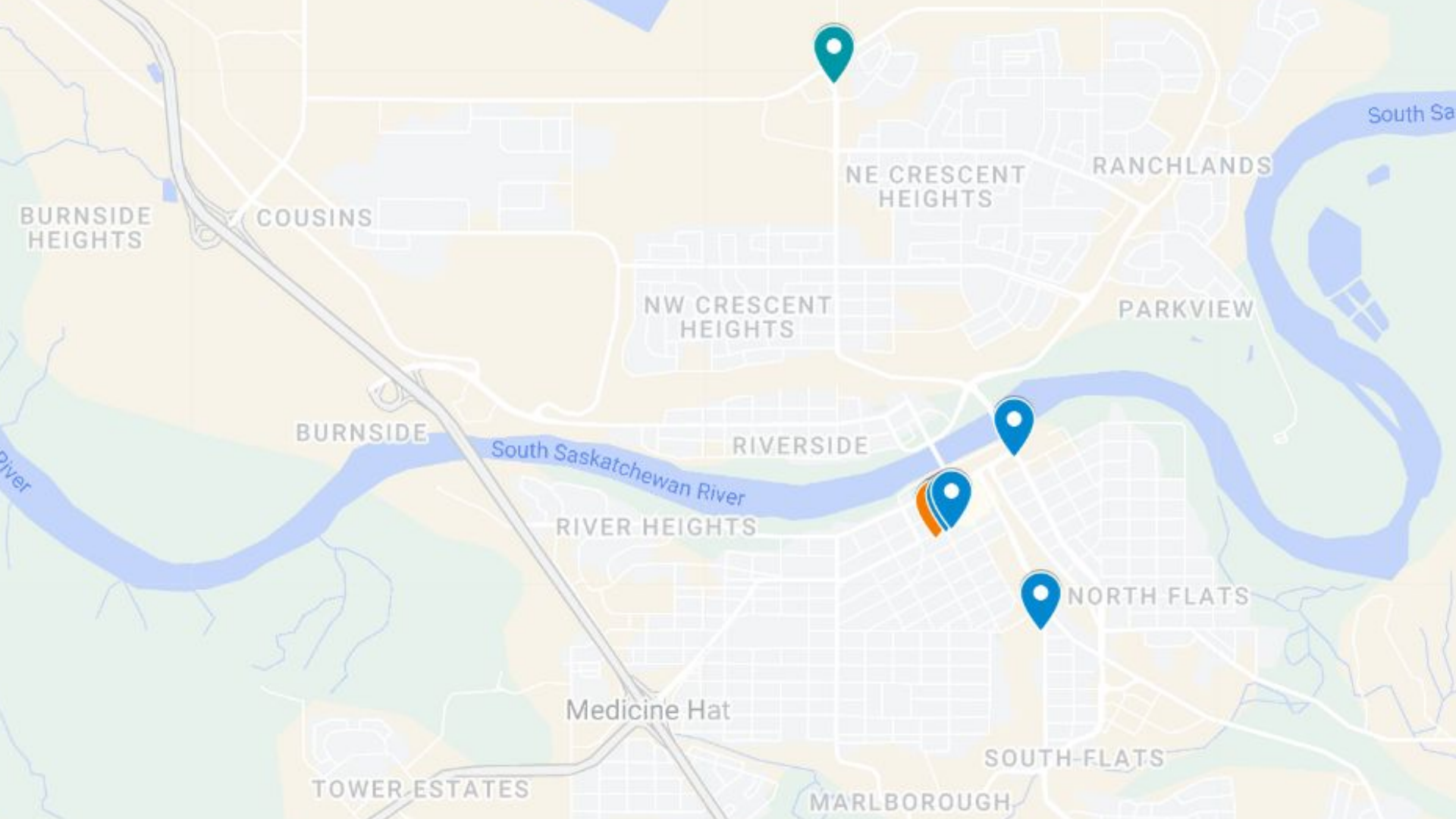
Strong Towns Curbside Chat

~~What have we done?~~
What do we do?

Identify ingredients of
genuine, durable value

Focus improvements in
these areas and stop
harming them

Norm Van Eeden Petersman
Member Advocate for Strong Towns



BURNSIDE HEIGHTS

COUSINS

BURNSIDE

TOWER ESTATES

NW CRESCENT HEIGHTS

NE CRESCENT HEIGHTS

RIVERSIDE

RIVER HEIGHTS

Medicine Hat

MARLBOROUGH

SOUTH-FLATS

NORTH FLATS

PARKVIEW

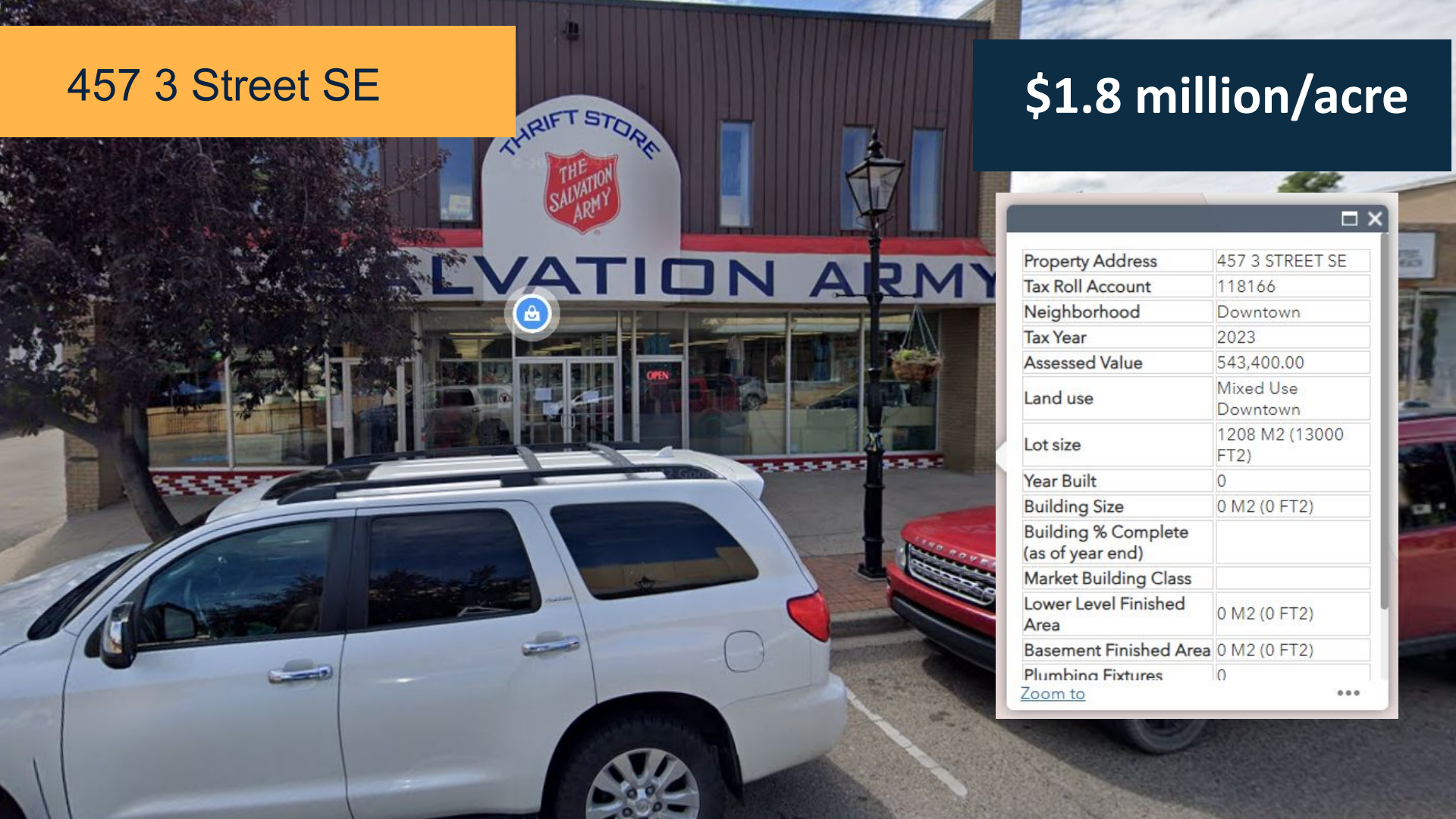
RANCHLANDS

South Sa

South Saskatchewan River

457 3 Street SE

\$1.8 million/acre



Property Address	457 3 STREET SE
Tax Roll Account	118166
Neighborhood	Downtown
Tax Year	2023
Assessed Value	543,400.00
Land use	Mixed Use Downtown
Lot size	1208 M2 (13000 FT2)
Year Built	0
Building Size	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Building % Complete (as of year end)	
Market Building Class	
Lower Level Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Basement Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Plumbina Fixtures	0

[Zoom to](#)



437 3 Street SE

\$4.9 million/acre



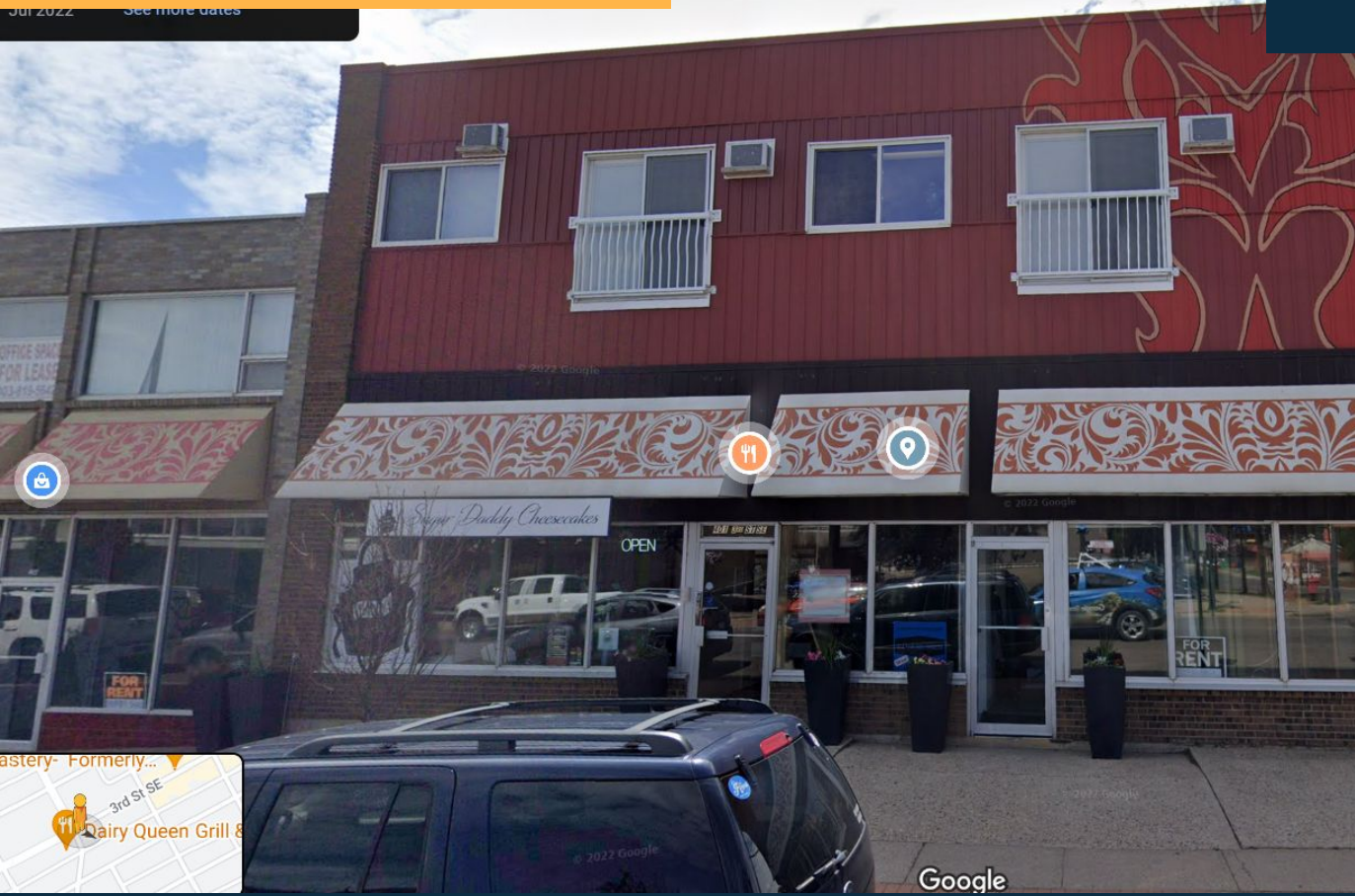
Property Address	437 3 STREET SE
Tax Roll Account	105259
Neighborhood	Downtown
Tax Year	2023
Assessed Value	736,600.00
Land use	Mixed Use Downtown
Lot size	604 M2 (6500 FT2)
Year Built	0
Building Size	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Building % Complete (as of year end)	
Market Building Class	
Lower Level Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Basement Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Plumbing Fixtures	0

[Zoom to](#)
[Land Title Sales by](#)

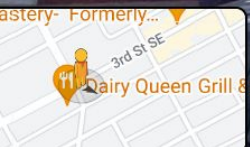

Sugar Daddy Cheesecakes

\$5.2 million/acre

Jul 2022 See more dates

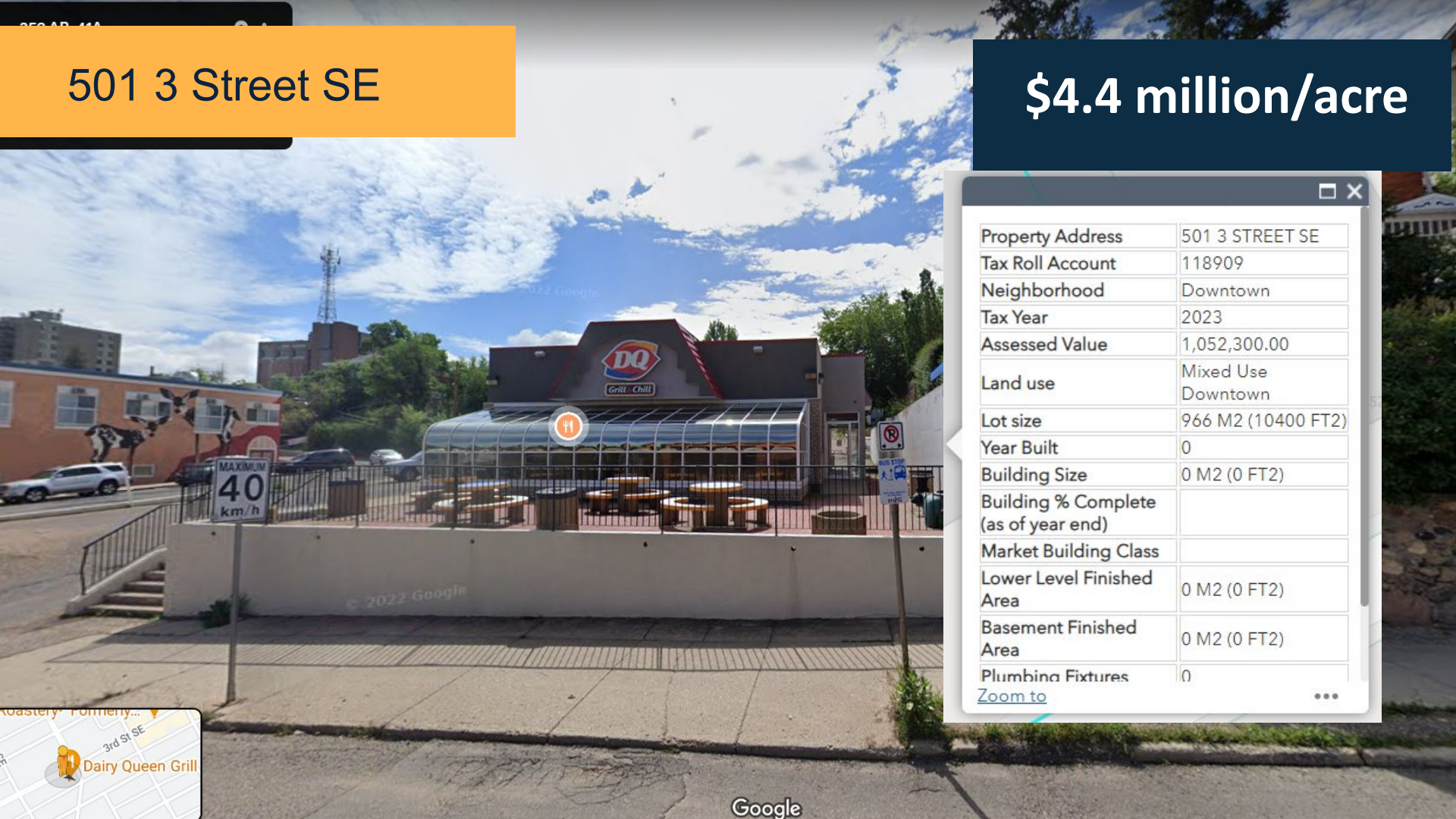


Property Address	477 3 STREET SE
Tax Roll Account	103367
Neighborhood	Downtown
Tax Year	2023
Assessed Value	777,900.00
Land use	Mixed Use Downtown
Lot size	604 M2 (6500 FT2)
Year Built	0
Building Size	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Building % Complete (as of year end)	
Market Building Class	
Lower Level Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Basement Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Plumbing Fixtures	0



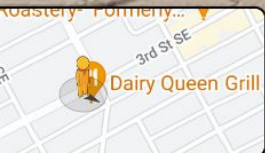
501 3 Street SE

\$4.4 million/acre



Property Address	501 3 STREET SE
Tax Roll Account	118909
Neighborhood	Downtown
Tax Year	2023
Assessed Value	1,052,300.00
Land use	Mixed Use Downtown
Lot size	966 M2 (10400 FT2)
Year Built	0
Building Size	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Building % Complete (as of year end)	
Market Building Class	
Lower Level Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Basement Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Plumbing Fixtures	0

[Zoom to](#)



660 6 St (Dayz Off Pub)

\$1.8 million/acre



Property Address	640 KINGSWAY AVENUE SE
Tax Roll Account	131453
Neighborhood	South Flats 1
Tax Year	2023
Assessed Value	1,072,700.00
Land use	Mixed Use
Lot size	2383 M2 (25648 FT2)
Year Built	0
Building Size	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Building % Complete (as of year end)	
Market Building Class	
Lower Level Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Basement Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Zoom to	

749 1 St SE

\$1.6 million/acre

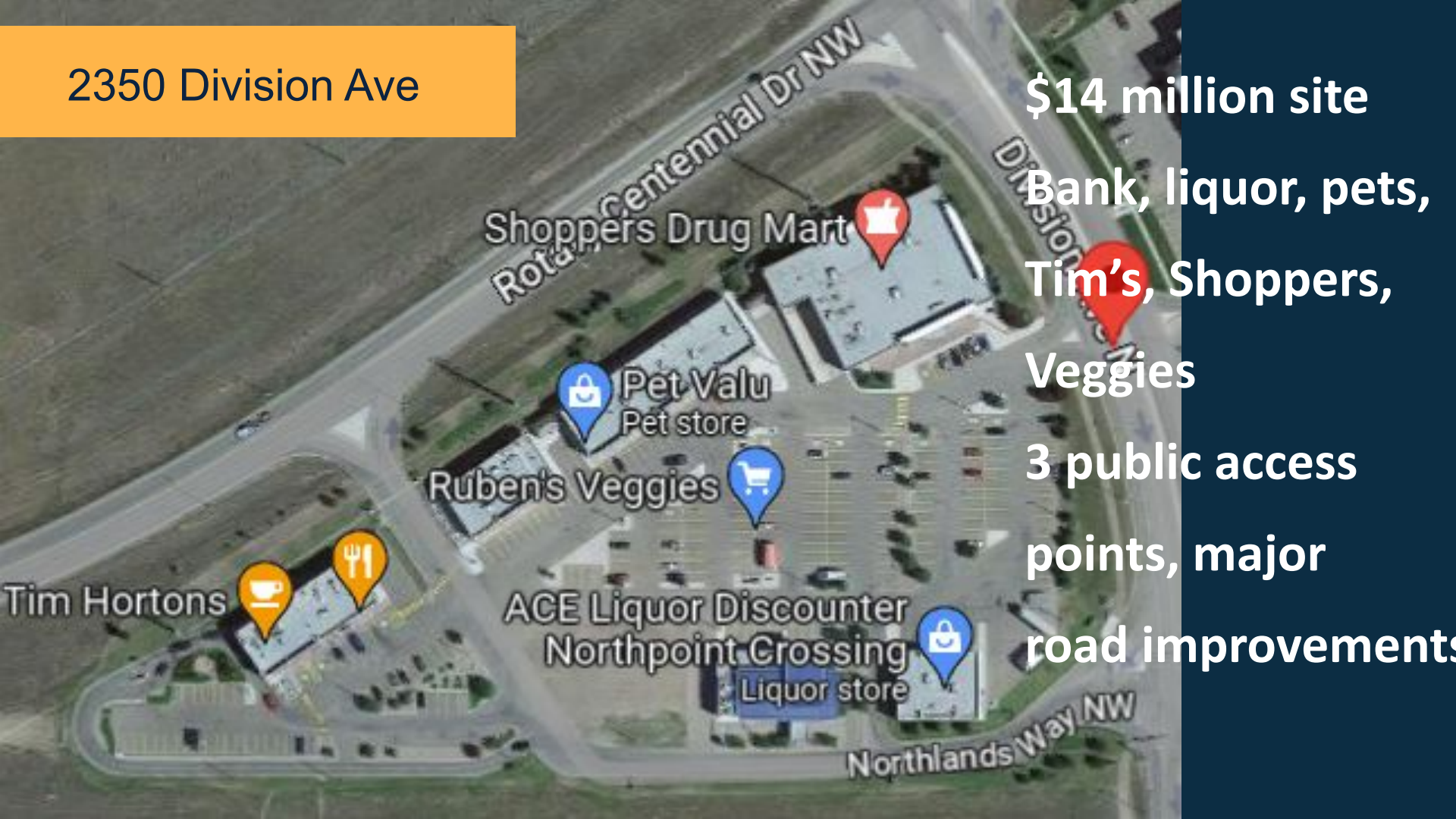


Property Address	749 1 STREET SE
Tax Roll Account	132706
Neighborhood	North Flats 1
Tax Year	2023
Assessed Value	873,900.00
Land use	Mixed Use
Lot size	2243 M2 (24145 FT2)
Year Built	0
Building Size	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Building % Complete (as of year end)	
Market Building Class	
Lower Level Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Basement Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Plumbing Fixtures	0
	Land Title Sale by

[Zoom to](#)



2350 Division Ave



\$14 million site

Bank, liquor, pets,

Tim's, Shoppers,

Veggies

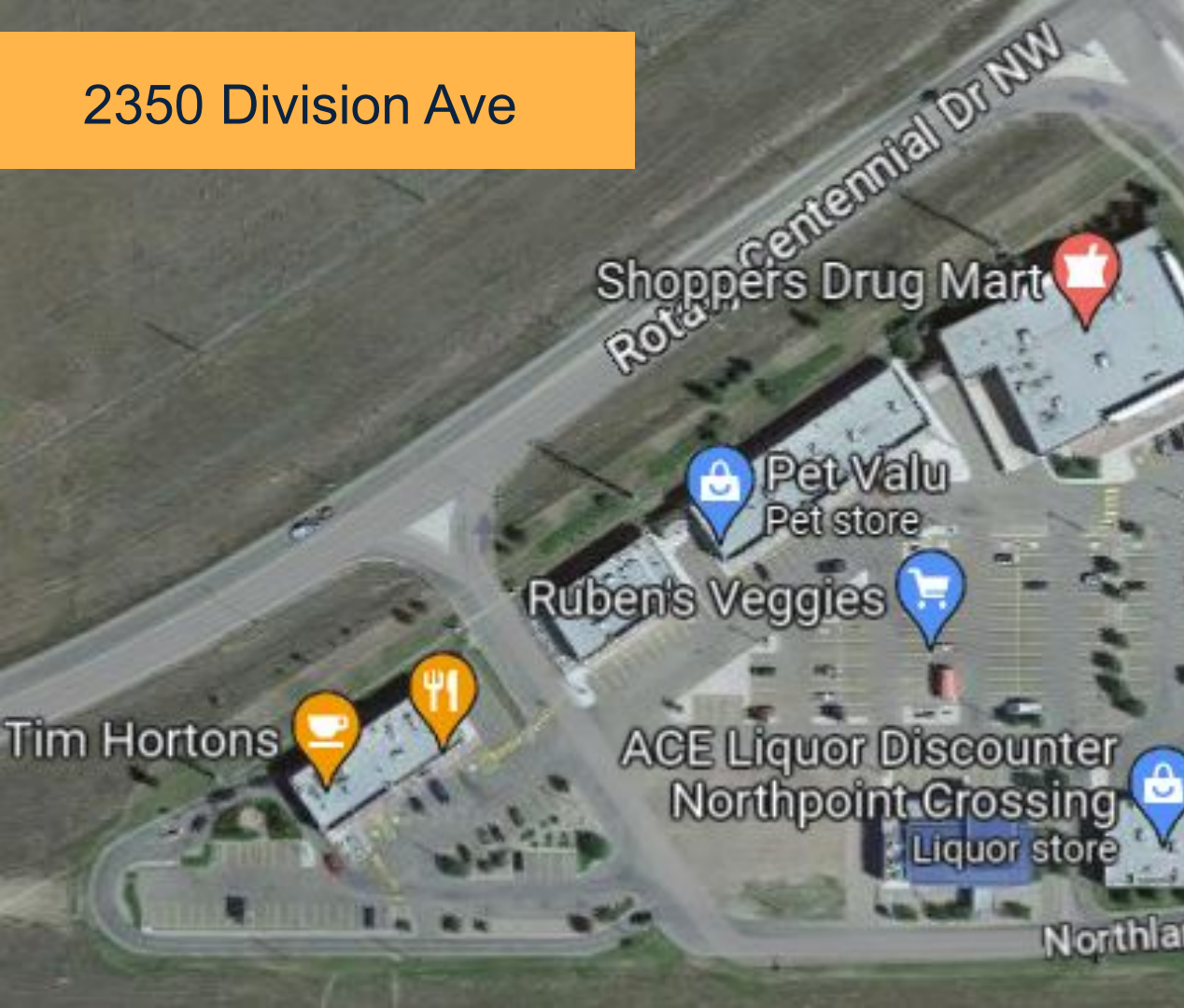
3 public access

points, major

road improvements

2350 Division Ave

\$1.9 million/acre



Property Address	2350 DIVISION AVENUE NW
Tax Roll Account	125561
Neighborhood	NE Crescent Heights 8
Tax Year	2023
Assessed Value	14,240,700.00
Land use	Mixed Use
Lot size	29380 M2 (316246 FT2)
Year Built	0
Building Size	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Building % Complete (as of year end)	
Market Building Class	
Lower Level Finished Area	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Basement Finished	0 M2 (0 FT2)
Zoom to	

2350 Division

\$14 million

\$1.9 million/acre

Sugar Daddy
Cheesecakes

\$777,900

\$5.2 million/acre

How can we improve a \$14 million property to be worth a comparable \$37.4 million?



PROMISE

**A local path to gradually restore
the capacity to create and sustain
local prosperity**







A photograph of an elderly man with a mustache and glasses, wearing a plaid shirt, working in a cluttered workshop. He is focused on a small object in his hands. The background is filled with various tools and materials on shelves.

Tim's Contention

“We have lost sight of what it takes to build enduring prosperity”

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Salt Lake City, Utah, showing a mix of residential and commercial buildings, a prominent communication tower, and a dense canopy of trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green. The sky is blue with light, wispy clouds.

Strong Towns Curbside Chat

~~What have we done?~~

~~What do we do?~~

What can change first?

Norm Van Eeden Petersman
Member Advocate for Strong Towns