

# Downtown Covington

Comprehensive Plan and  
Implementing Zoning  
2005

# 4.0 DOWNTOWN ELEMENT

## 4.1 Introduction

The Downtown Element is intended to be the first of several neighborhood plans for the City of Covington. Because this element is for a specific subarea of the City, it addresses many of the major issues of the Comprehensive Plan such as land use, transportation, and parks and open space, as found in other elements but with specific focus on the downtown subarea. This element is structured similarly to the other elements of this comprehensive plan: it begins with a description of existing conditions; including an assessment of opportunities and constraints; includes a discussion of the major concepts; and concludes with a set of goals and policies and key implementation mechanisms.

### 4.1.1 Purpose of Downtown Element

The purpose of the Downtown Element is to lay a detailed framework for the downtown portion of the City of Covington with emphasis on land use, circulation, and physical development. In addition, because the central business district is the site of the majority of Covington's commercial enterprise, this element also constitutes the City's Economic Development Element to address economic development planning. The concept behind this element is to encourage appropriate development in an area with existing infrastructure to support planned economic and population growth through a mixture of commercial, office, residential, and public uses.

The intent of the Comprehensive Plan, of which the Downtown Element is a part, is to provide a bridge between the City's Vision Statement and the City's actions building this community. The relationship between the Plan, the Vision Statement, the State Growth Management Act (GMA), development regulations, capital budgets, and projects are illustrated in Fig. 4.1.

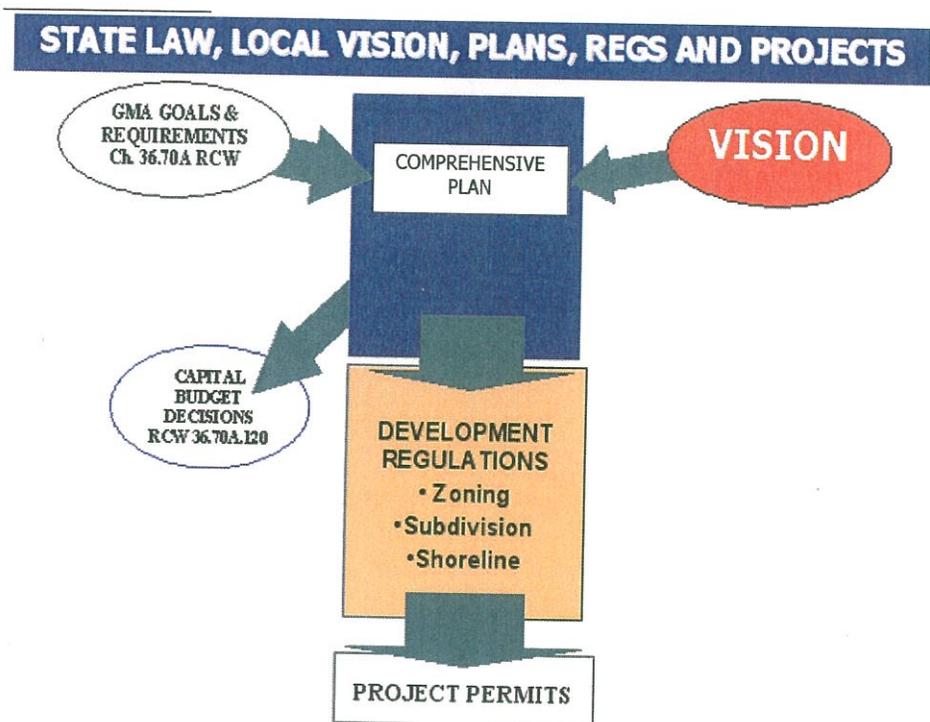


Fig. 4.1

The City’s Vision Statement provides:

The City of Covington is a place where community, businesses and civic leaders are partners in building a city that is family-oriented, safe and pedestrian-friendly. A community that proudly invests in enhancing our small town character and natural environment, and provides diverse recreational opportunities, as well as remaining financially responsible.

The City Council has further identified five elements essential to achieving this vision:

**DOWNTOWN** Covington will have a downtown that is well designed and pedestrian-friendly with a permanent combination of commercial and residential areas.

**RESIDENTIAL** Covington residential areas will be safe, diverse, and accessible and will have well-maintained neighborhoods that instill a sense of community.

Our **ENVIRONMENT** will be preserved with responsible limitations while enhancing the area’s natural beauty.

DESIGN STANDARDS Covington will have high-quality design and construction standards that give buildings and structures a sense of permanence and provide for an aesthetically pleasing skyline in our community.

PARKS AND OPEN SPACE are an important part of our community's future and quality of life.

## 4.2 Existing Conditions Summary

### 4.2.1 Existing Land Use

Existing conditions in the Downtown subarea (as of 2005) are shown on Figure 4.2. Most commercial development since incorporation in 1997 has occurred on the north side of SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street (also known as SR 516 and the Kent-Kangley Road) between SR 18 and Wax Road. Examples are Covington Place and Skagen Plaza. These newer projects offer a variety of retail, restaurant and office uses, are generally one story, and exhibit coordinated building signage and landscaping. The only multi-story buildings are the Valley Medical Center building and the office building which contains City Hall (two stories), and the Adagio Apartments (three stories). The first permit for a multi-story retail building was recently issued for a two story Kohl's department store. The tallest building in Downtown Covington is the Multicare Center just east of Wax Road (four stories).

The portion of the Downtown that lies directly south of SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street consists primarily of older developments that pre-date Covington's incorporation. Much of it is contained in large single-story retail plazas surrounded by large parking lots which lack well coordinated internal circulation or connections to the surrounding street grid. Dominant examples include the Safeway Shopping Center, and the QFC plaza. This area also contains a number of free-standing pads with drive-through facilities, including banks and fast-food restaurants.

The Downtown also contains a small percentage of public or institutional properties and facilities including the King County Public Library, the Covington Elementary School, City Hall, the U.S. Post Office and several churches. Jenkins Creek Park abuts the downtown to the northeast.

To the south and west of the SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street corridor is a large area containing a broad range of land uses, including a Fred Meyer immediately south of the corridor, industrial uses west of Covington Way, the Covington Elementary School on Wax Road, and several small and older subdivisions, including Covington Firs. Many of these uses are separated by large tracts of undeveloped or underdeveloped land. Although these lands abut major arterials,

such as Wax Road, Covington Way and SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street, these super-blocks lack an internal road network to link the arterials and provide secondary access.

Lands immediately east of Wax Road, between Covington Way and SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street are primarily developed with single family homes, many of which are approaching the end of their viability for residential use. A few parcels closer to the SE 272<sup>nd</sup> intersection are developed with more intense uses, such as a bank and a church. Many of the parcels located in the southerly portion of the corridor are traversed by Jenkins Creek and its associated wetlands. *See Fig. 4.3.*

This pattern of single family homes adjacent to Jenkins Creek continues further north beginning where Wax Road turns into 180<sup>th</sup> Ave SE and continues north to SR 18. The housing stock is in relatively good condition, largely centered on three cul-de-sacs which face the Burrwood subdivision to the west and abut the Jenkins Creek Park to the east. Further north is a pattern of larger lots which can accommodate residential infill at the historic area densities of 8 units per acre.

Those lands east of Wax Road which front onto SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street comprise a large area, and share certain characteristics with each of the other Downtown districts. The area hosts the tallest building in town (the four story Multi-Care building), a scattering of low-rise, stand-alone retail uses, and a few single family homes. The lot pattern is fairly large with a number of undeveloped parcels in the five to fifteen acre range. These large and undeveloped parcels present a major opportunity for coordinated site master-planning. The area is also traversed by Jenkins Creek and its associated wetlands.

Other residential uses presently within the Downtown include single family subdivisions such as Covington Firs and Covington Park. The only multifamily is the Adagio apartment complex in the northern portion of Downtown. The Covington Firs subdivision is largely isolated from the City's other residential areas, while the Covington Park plat abuts the new Wal-Mart to the west and commercially zoned land to the south.

To the north of the Downtown are large, relatively stable neighborhoods of moderately priced single-family homes, including the Burrwood subdivision. These are interspersed with significant areas of vacant or underutilized lands, many of which remain in a large lot development pattern. Some of these lands have recently been submitted for review as new residential subdivisions at the historic area density of 8 units per acre.

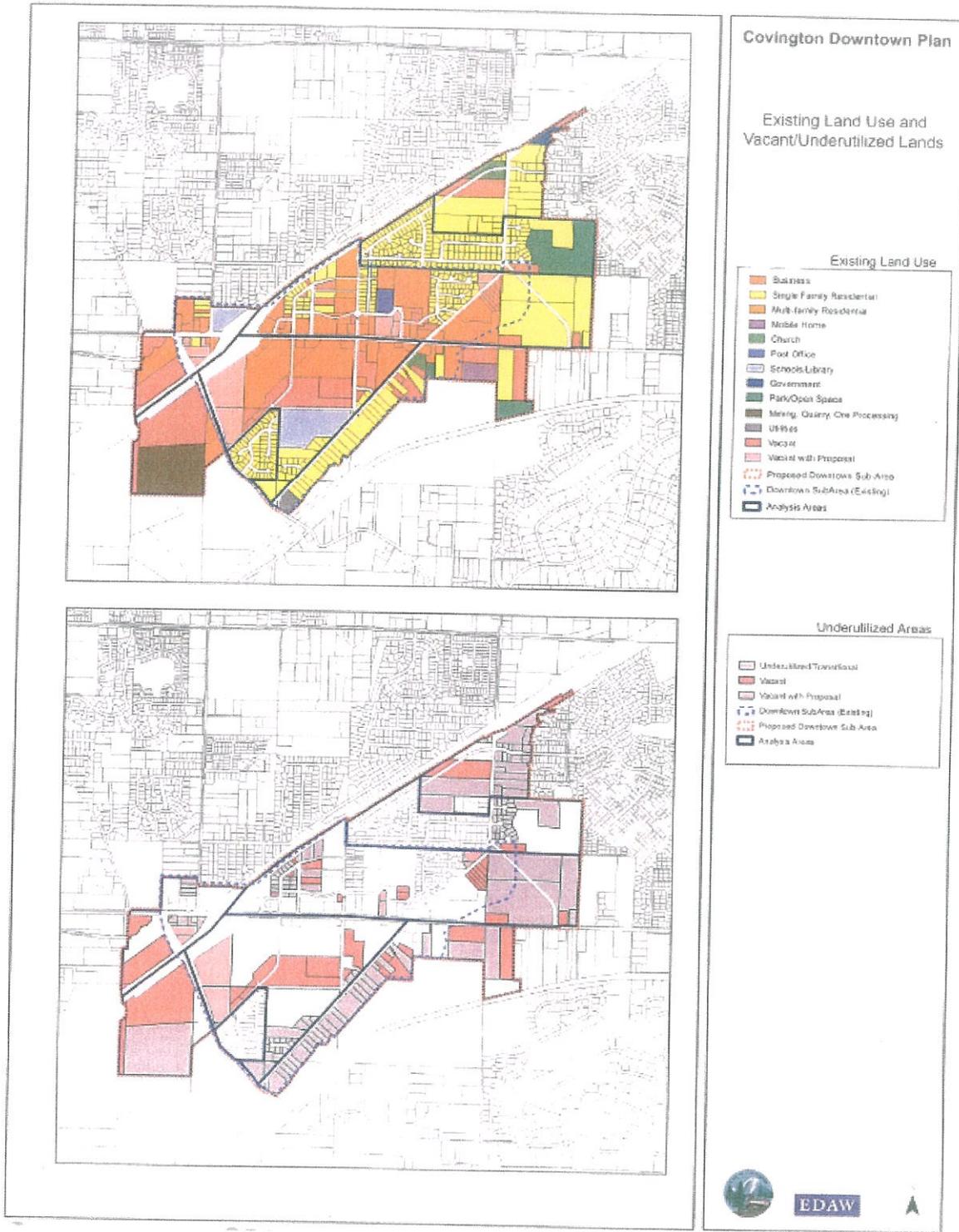


Fig. 4.2

### 4.2.2 Circulation

Downtown Covington is not currently served by a complete street grid, but rather by a limited number of arterials. The major road corridor is SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street (also known as SR 516 and Kent-Kangley Road), a principal arterial that provides east-west regional travel as well as serving the majority of Covington's commercial properties. The other major street serving downtown is SE Wax Road, a collector arterial that traverses the eastern edge of downtown in a northeast-southwest alignment. The only north-south road corridors are 172<sup>nd</sup> Avenue SE a non-arterial street which connects SE Wax Road with SE 270<sup>th</sup> Place, crossing SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street and Covington Way SE, a minor arterial that connects SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street with the Covington-Lake Sawyer Road.

In addition to the limited street grid, the other notable feature of downtown Covington's circulation infrastructure is the limited pedestrian amenities. Few of the roads that were built prior to Covington's incorporation contained sidewalks and other pedestrian facilities, and those that do are very basic. For example, SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street was initially developed with 5-foot-wide sidewalks on both sides of the five lane roadway, but walking is difficult due to the frequency and width of commercial driveways that interrupt the sidewalk and the lack of planting strip to separate pedestrians from the heavy traffic volumes. Also, the lack of street grid and existence of large parking areas increases the apparent distances between destinations, making walking an inconvenient, unpleasant, and possibly dangerous experience.

By contrast, an award-winning access control project has been implemented for most of SR-516 to limit driveways, add street trees in median, and introduce traffic signalization with pedestrian crosswalks.

### 4.2.3 Summary of Downtown Past and Present

Much of Downtown Covington was originally developed under the rules for unincorporated King County, and was characterized by retail shopping plazas and associated parking. Single-story, single use buildings with some minor architectural distinction dominated Covington's most visible parcels, providing little visual cue of being the downtown of a city. The image was not clearly a downtown due to the limited street grid, minimal pedestrian activity, and the lack of civic buildings, cultural landmarks, or public open space typical of cities.

More recent development under the current City's code has begun to change the Downtown's visual image. New streets with sidewalks, planting strips, decorative crosswalks, and distinctive pedestrian scale lighting are being built. With Covington Place and Skagen Plaza, the architecture is improving with the generous use of masonry rather than the more common application of Exterior Insulation Finishing Systems (EIFS) or Dryvit-type surfaces. Those projects have also set a new standard for pedestrian-friendly access across the parking areas to store fronts, more coherent signage and landscaping.

### **4.3 Downtown Vision**

Downtown Covington is the commercial, social, and civic heart of this community. That is true for its 2005 population of 16,000 and will become more so for its projected 2025 population of 20,000. While Downtown provides important goods and services for Covington's residents, it also serves a much larger market area, estimated at 184,000 in 2005 and forecasted to increase to almost 250,000 by 2025.

The commercial growth of the Downtown will reap local benefits in the form of a strengthened retail tax base for the City. However, there are risks and costs associated with providing an over-supply of commercially-zoned land. The Downtown's land area must be "right-sized" to accommodate the 2 million square feet of new commercial uses projected to locate here by 2025, yet remain compact enough to encourage future investment decisions by promoting focused, coherent and orderly growth. A compact pattern will help Downtown to function from a pedestrian perspective and prevent needless encroachment into single family neighborhoods to the north.

#### **4.3.1 Concepts to Guide the Future of the Downtown**

Following are organizing concepts for the Downtown's future, grouped into three headings: (1) land use districts, where the majority of new development will be private, (2) capital plans which address the public infrastructure needed to serve existing and future land uses, and (3) policies to enhance community life and local identity by creating signature streets and public places.

#### **4.3.2 Land Use Districts**

Residential uses integrated with commercial uses are strongly encouraged in and near the Downtown. This close-in population not only provides additional housing choices and lessens vehicle trips, but boosts civic vitality and security, and helps provide a market to support Downtown businesses.

The Downtown consists of five inter-related but somewhat discrete districts shown in Fig. 4.4 and described in detail below. These are: (a) Town Center; (b) Gateway West; (c) Jenkins Creek Corridor; (d) Gateway East, and (e) North Town.

a. *Town Center*

The Town Center district is focused on the SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street corridor between Covington Way and Wax Road. It consists of the emergent Town Center North (DN 2) and the potential future Town Center South (DN 1) that lies south of SE 272<sup>nd</sup>. These Town Center designations are intended to promote a lively pedestrian oriented area where some citizens may choose to live, work and shop without being dependent on the automobile.

The Town Center, particularly the portion south of SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street, is intended to provide the visual, pedestrian and civic heart of the City. This is where the greatest mix of the most intensive land uses should occur, as well as the tallest buildings, and shops and restaurant fronts immediately behind the sidewalk for pedestrian-oriented streets. Buildings in the Town Center should convey a sense of permanence through the use of durable, quality materials such as masonry, brick, stone and wood. Primary building facades should be oriented to the street, not just parking lots.

Several recent models in this region illustrate the ambience and community focus that Town Center should aspire to: Juanita Village in Kirkland, the Mill Creek Town Center, and portions of the downtowns of Edmonds and Kirkland.

Special consideration is appropriate for the Covington Park subdivision (DN 10) to reflect its present circumstances and its alternative future possibilities. If the area remains in single family use, adjacent commercial developments should be obliged to provide significant functional separation, as well as visual and noise buffering. If a substantial number of the property owners in DN 10 choose to convert to a more intense land use, the City should require that some minimum aggregation be required.

b. *Gateway West*

Adjoining the Town Center to the south is the “Gateway West” area which consists of sub-areas DN 3, DN 4, DN 5, and DN 6. These areas are the “Gateways” to the Downtown from Kent to the west and Black Diamond to the south and east. They are sited to maximize access to regional transportation corridors and minimize noise and traffic impacts to less intense land uses. Even though these areas are more dependent upon automobile traffic, their proximity to the Town Center suggests that they should be

designed in a manner compatible with those areas. This includes linked walkways, landscaping, and parking.

An eclectic mix of commercial uses will be suited to different portions of the Gateway West area, due to varying topography, adjacent uses and freeway access. Areas closer to SR 18 would be attractive and appropriate for industrial or freeway-oriented uses, such as automobile dealership, in addition to more traditional retail and restaurant uses. The large parcel size and access to the regional road grid make large scale retail, i.e., "big box" stores viable and desirable throughout Gateway West. Although the building footprint and parking field appropriate in Gateway West will be much larger than in the Town Center, design guidelines, pedestrian amenities and landscaping are appropriate here too.

Due to the inadequate capacity of the road network in and near the Gateway West, intensive development of these properties must be predicated on proportionate participation in financing the road grid and intersection improvements shown in Fig. 4.5.

Special consideration is appropriate for the Covington Firs subdivision (DN 5) to reflect its present circumstances and its alternative future possibilities. If the area remains in single family use, adjacent commercial developments should be obligated to provide significant functional separation, as well as visual and noise buffering. If a substantial number of the property owners in DN 5 choose to convert to a more intense land use, the City should require that at least a significant minimum aggregation be required possibly as large as an aggregation of the entire DN-5 land area prior to conversion from residential to commercial use.

*c. Jenkins Creek Corridor*

Jenkins Creek traverses the Downtown area generally in a north to south direction, flowing across the backyards of existing residential neighborhoods adjacent to Wax Road and 180<sup>th</sup> Ave SE (DN 7B which has segments both south and north of SE 272<sup>nd</sup> St). See Fig. 4.3. The Creek and its associated wetlands is a constraint on development potential due to setbacks required from these critical areas. However, the Creek is also an amenity due to the green, open space it provides for these residential areas, and the potential it creates for a regional trail serving the larger community.

The existing single family detached uses may continue indefinitely as permitted uses in the Corridor. However, due to the impacts of the Creek setback, and the future heavy traffic forecasted for both Wax Road and 180<sup>th</sup> Ave SE, it is appropriate to enable new residential development to occur, albeit in a different building form. One opportunity would be to redevelop some of these

parcels as common-wall townhouses. Without changing the underlying density (8 dwelling units per acre) the townhouse option would enable the units to be clustered away from the creek. A good model for this density and cluster approach is the Shiloh Condominiums close to Kentwood High School.

Another alternative form would be a cottage style development, with detached rather than common wall homes. Cottages would have a smaller footprint than most single family homes and typically are clustered away from site constraints and configured around a common courtyard. This form of housing typically is approaches a density of 12 units to the acre, such as the Danielson Grove project in Kirkland and Connover Commons project in Redmond.

A third option for the Jenkins Creek Corridor would be to allow small professional offices to locate in existing single family structures. Since the predominant use in the corridor will likely remain types of residential, any converted offices would have to have appropriate limitations on signage, hours of operation, and parking.

Any uses other than existing single family detached housing should be obliged to provide frontage improvements to the Jenkins Creek Park Community Trail. *See Fig. 4.6.*

d. *Gateway East*

The Gateway East district consists of sub-districts DN 7A, 8 and 9, located east of the Town Center. These areas provide the “Gateways” to the Downtown from Maple Valley to the east and from the residential neighborhoods north of the Town Center and across SR 18. Gateway East is impacted by heavy traffic volumes on SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street and Wax Road/180<sup>th</sup> Ave SE, and development of properties in this district will need to participate substantially in the roadway widening and intersection improvements scheduled for these arterials. *See Fig. 4.5.* In addition, lands in DN 9 will be critical to completing the improvement of a new bypass connecting 180<sup>th</sup> Ave SE and SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street.

Unlike the Gateway West district, there is no immediate pedestrian and visual connection between Gateway East and the Town Center. This district is somewhat remote from the rest of the Downtown, as well as most established residential areas. This remoteness, as well as the relatively large parcel size, particularly in DN 8 and DN 9, suggests that this area may best be developed in large master planned sites, with a variety of retail, office and residential uses, larger building heights and sizes. Master planning of large sites in Gateway East would create greater flexibility to accommodate public objectives such as creation of the bypass mentioned above,

and creation of major segments of the Jenkins Creek community trail.

Because of the potential for larger structures, and a greater number of structures on large sites, design guidelines should be applied in Gateway East to achieve urban design objectives of human scale, pedestrian linkages, and visual coherence.

The smaller parcels in DN 8, and particularly DN 7B, do not likely have the opportunity for the larger structures and more intensive uses that may occur in DN 9. A variety of freestanding retail uses, including restaurants, shops, office and automobile service uses would be appropriate for these areas. Even these smaller sites should participate in frontage roadway improvements and improvement of their respective segments of the Jenkins Creek community trail.

#### *North Town*

This existing high density residential (8 dwelling units per acre) neighborhood immediately north of the Town Center is included in the Downtown, not because it should host commercial uses, but because its vitality is important to the vitality of Downtown. Together with the Jenkins Creek residential areas, North Town provides hundreds of families within walking distance of the goods and services of Town Center. This contributes to the Downtown objectives of creating a pedestrian oriented center, with close-in customers for the businesses, and provision of affordable housing for downtown workers. Wherever possible, new pedestrian connections between North Town and Town Center should be improved and maintained.

North Town has sufficient undeveloped or underdeveloped land to accommodate a variety of future civic uses, such as an elementary school, ballfields, a community center or city hall. Such uses would provide greater amenity, security, and stability for this close-in residential neighborhood

#### **4.3.4 Capital Plans must support Land Use Plans**

The Growth Management Act requires that the Comprehensive Plan's Land Use Element be consistent with and supported by its Capital Facilities Element. Therefore, public funding of the designated capital projects identified in the capital facilities element of the comprehensive plan must be likely to occur. If that is not the case, either the capital facilities element, or the land use element, or both, must be amended. The City must commit

sufficient local funds to leverage the federal, state, and developer contributions needed to build the necessary infrastructure.

The Capital Facilities Element of this plan describes at a city-wide level the roads, park, storm drainage and other public infrastructure necessary to serve the growth and development projected to occur over the next twenty years. Identified in that Element are a number of capital projects, including many within the Downtown Area. Several of those road and intersection projects are noted on Fig. 4.5, the proposed street grid. Public park projects in the Downtown are noted on Fig. 4.6.

For downtown Covington to function as a true downtown, internal circulation, both vehicular and pedestrian must be prioritized. A major challenge will be to improve access to the uses in the emerging Downtown while also facilitating movement through the Downtown. The proposed local street grid (*See* Fig. 4.5) would greatly improve internal vehicular circulation in parts of Downtown by adding new road segments and making intersection improvements at existing and projected future congestion points. Intersections identified within the plan for traffic control improvements with either a roundabout or traffic signalization will be evaluated at the time of design to determine which of the two traffic control alternatives would be more effective for the expected conditions.

For example, the creation of 166<sup>th</sup> Ave SE linking SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street and Covington Way would open up access to large parcels in the interior of the Downtown, while also relieving pressure on Wax Road as a north-south route. In addition, since much of the Downtown's future market area lies to the southeast, toward Black Diamond, it will be important to improve transportation linkages such as a connector across City and rural land to the Kent-Black Diamond Road.

#### **4.3.5 Signature Streets, Gateways, and Public Places**

In addition to their primary function of carrying vehicular traffic, streets perform several other key functions in building a Downtown. The design and furnishing of the streetscape are critical to creating a pedestrian-friendly Downtown. Downtown streets, particularly in the Town Center district, should provide space for trees, benches, wide sidewalks, and outdoor dining opportunities. Local streets should support two-way vehicle lanes as well as 5-foot to 8-foot-wide sidewalks, street trees, and pedestrian lighting. Safety, accessibility, and maintenance should be top priorities for new walking surfaces.

The City should also consider the important role that street names can play in making a Downtown more legible and memorable. While the numbered streets of the King County grid serve a utilitarian purpose, they can also contribute to a feeling of anonymity rather than a sense of place. In contrast, both Covington Way and Wax Road are well-known to residents and emergency responders, have historic or place-specific meaning, and assist in orienting newcomers to the Downtown. As the City builds and improves the roads shown in Fig. 4.5, it should consider christening several of them as “signature streets” such as “Main Street,” “Central Avenue,” “Jenkins Creek Parkway,” and the “Black Diamond Connector.” The City might also consider re-naming a segment of its most prominent street – the variously named SR 516, SE 272<sup>nd</sup> Street, Kent-Kangley Road – as “Covington Boulevard.” See Fig. 4.6.

An important part of community identity is the sense of arrival that one experiences at the “gateway” to the city, which in Covington’s case is generally the entry points in Downtown. Not only does this present an opportunity to make a good first impression on visitors, but can reinforce the image that its own citizens hold about their community. Some cities have erected simple metal signs or markers at such points, others have installed more elaborate gateway treatments with customized signs, landscaping, and illumination. Covington should consider what type of gateway marker or signage would be appropriate at the locations identified in Fig. 4.6.

The downtown of every great city, large or small, provides spaces where people can congregate. Sometimes on public land and sometimes on private property, these spaces constitute the “third place” where a variety of meetings and inter-personal interactions take place, some by chance, others by design. It is in these spaces where the civic life of communities is played out, where neighbors meet for coffee, or encounter each other while running errands, where children learn to explore their home town in a stimulating and relatively safe environment, and where the community celebrates special events like Covington Days and the Fourth of July.

Some of the places will occur as stores and restaurants recognize the commercial advantage of making their businesses attractive places for outdoor dining or casual plazas. Others will be more formal public parks that should be provided through some combination of public sector planning and private sector development in exchange for the City permitting for more intensive development nearby. Several potential sites are identified in Fig. 4.6.

## 4.5 Implementation

### 4.5.1 “Building Block” zoning and a “Form-Based Code”

At the time of incorporation in 1997, the City’s downtown zoning map and development regulations was based on the traditional and generic King County Code. The only significant refinement since then has been the creation of two, rather than a single, zoning district for the Downtown area. While the City has initiated a number of design guidelines, most of those are advisory rather than mandatory, some of them are more subjective than objective, and few of them deal specifically with the important questions of building bulk and scale.

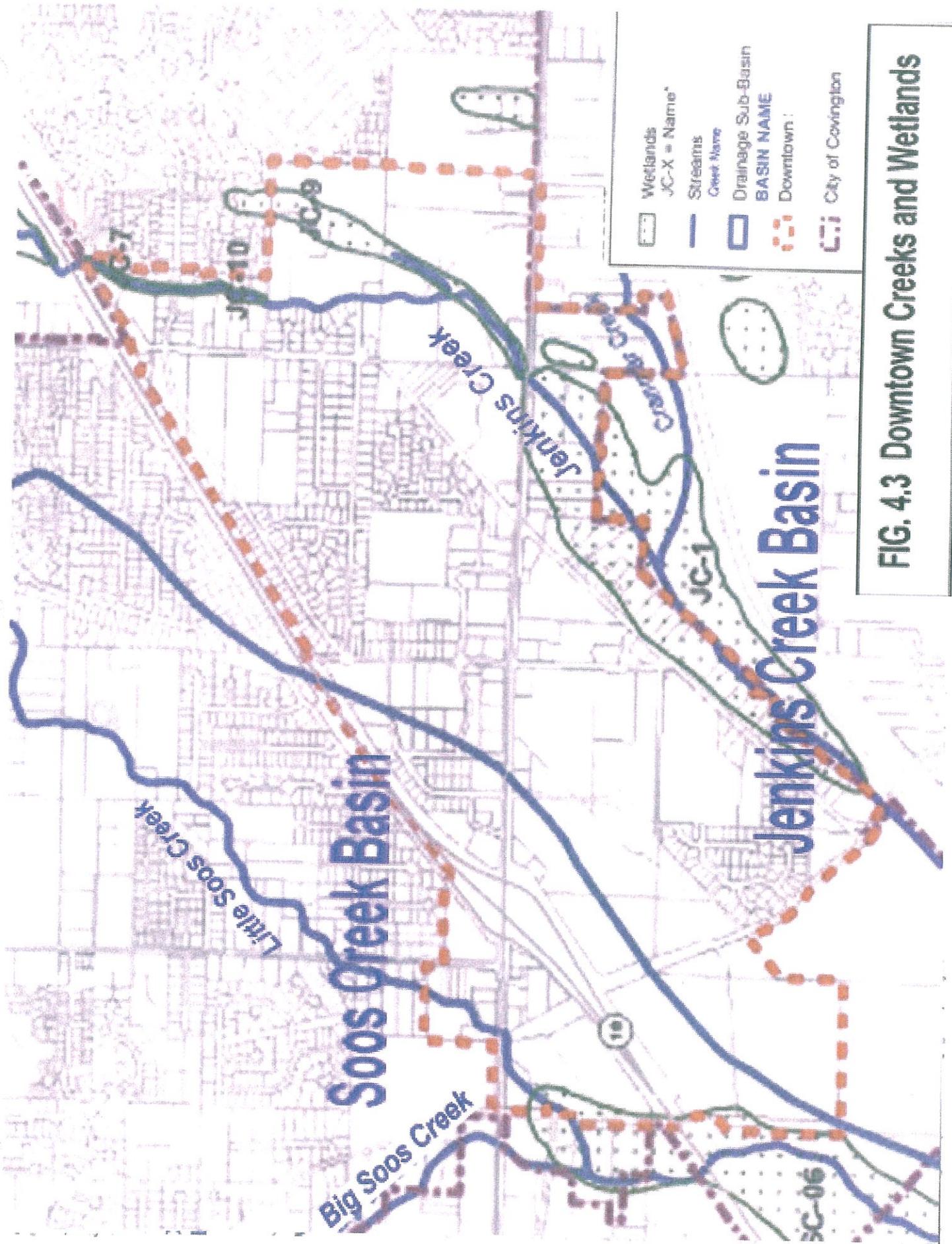
As detailed above, the circumstances and public policy objectives for the Downtown vary greatly from sub-area to sub-area. Likewise, this Plan calls for accommodation of up to 2 million additional square feet of commercial growth in the coming 20 years. The two-zone zoning map and lack of detailed, objective development standards no longer serve as a suitable means to implement the Downtown Plan.

By mirroring the eleven sub-areas shown in Fig. 4.4 as discrete zones on the new Zoning Map, the City will be able to tailor development standards to each. This “building block” approach to zoning districts will enable the City to more effectively shape future growth consistent with this Plan and the community’s Vision.

A major focus of the development standards for the eleven new zones will be the bulk, setback, lot coverage, and architectural details of new structures. This “form-based” approach provides more objective information to code administrators, developers and designers alike.

### 4.5.2 Design standards and Administrative Design Review

Design is an important part of creating a downtown that will help encourage citizens and visitors to shop locally. As addressed in urban design policy DTP 9.23 (*see* Appendix) Covington will continue to use design guidelines and articulate many of them as development standards within the zoning code. Such standards will use photographs and drawings to clearly illustrate principles and priorities identified in this Plan and the City’s Vision Plan. The focus on administrative review of adopted design standards, rather than discretionary design review by an architectural review board is intended to keep the permit process objective, timely and predictable, while also assuring that the project outcomes meet the City’s articulated policies for Downtown.



**FIG. 4.3 Downtown Creeks and Wetlands**

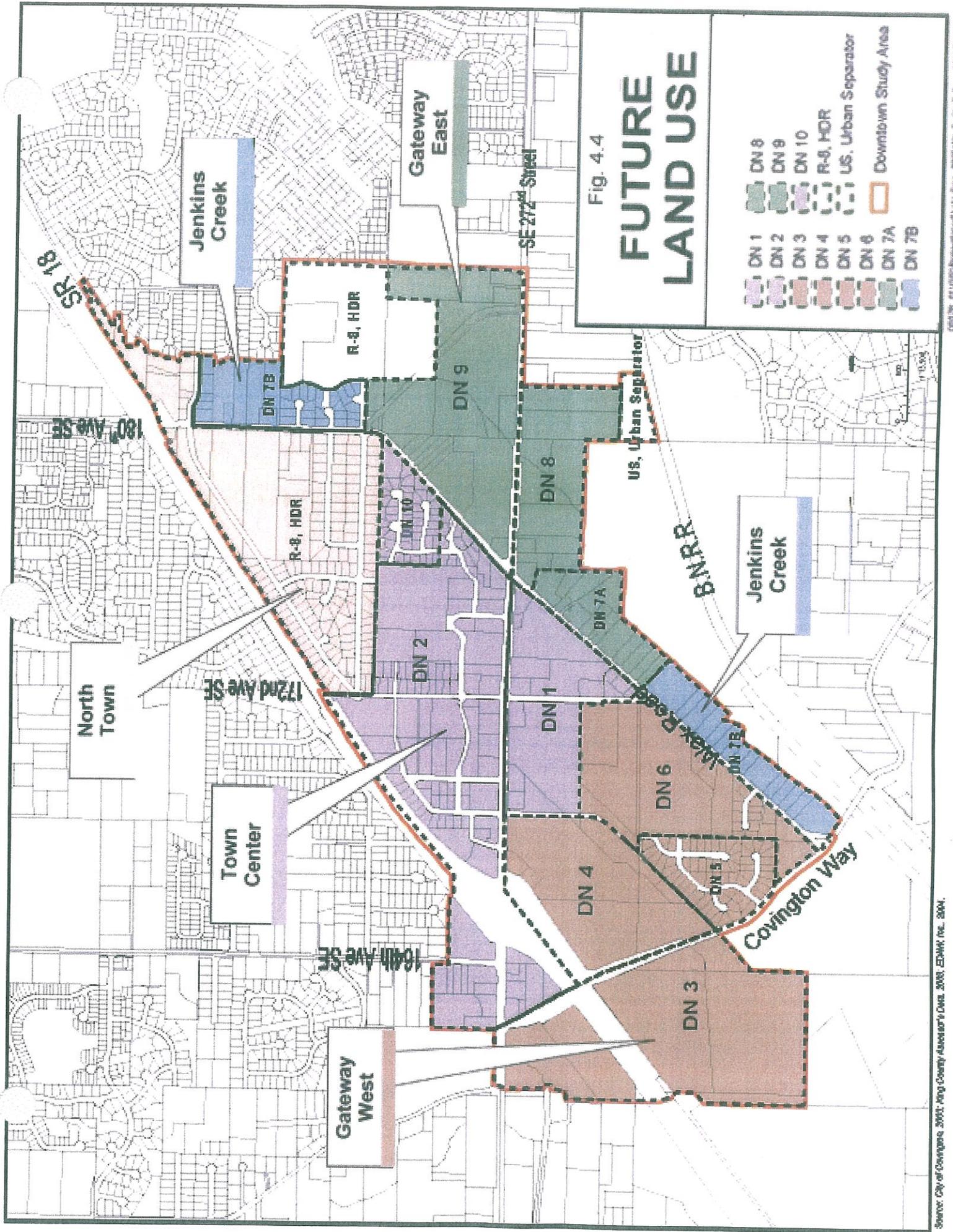
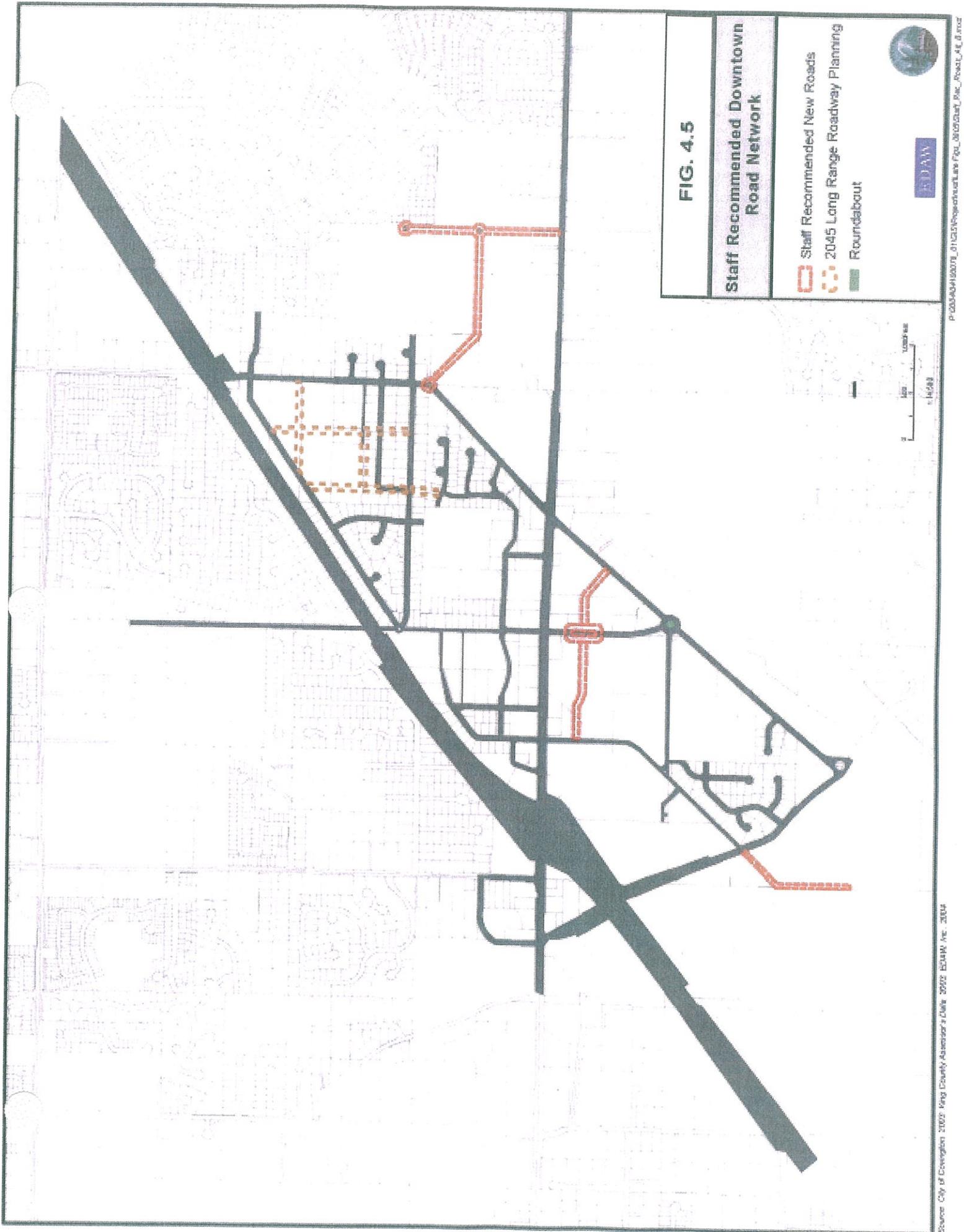


Fig. 4.4

# FUTURE LAND USE

- DN 1
- DN 2
- DN 3
- DN 4
- DN 5
- DN 6
- DN 7A
- DN 7B
- DN 8
- DN 9
- DN 10
- R-8, HDR
- US, Urban Separator
- Downtown Study Area

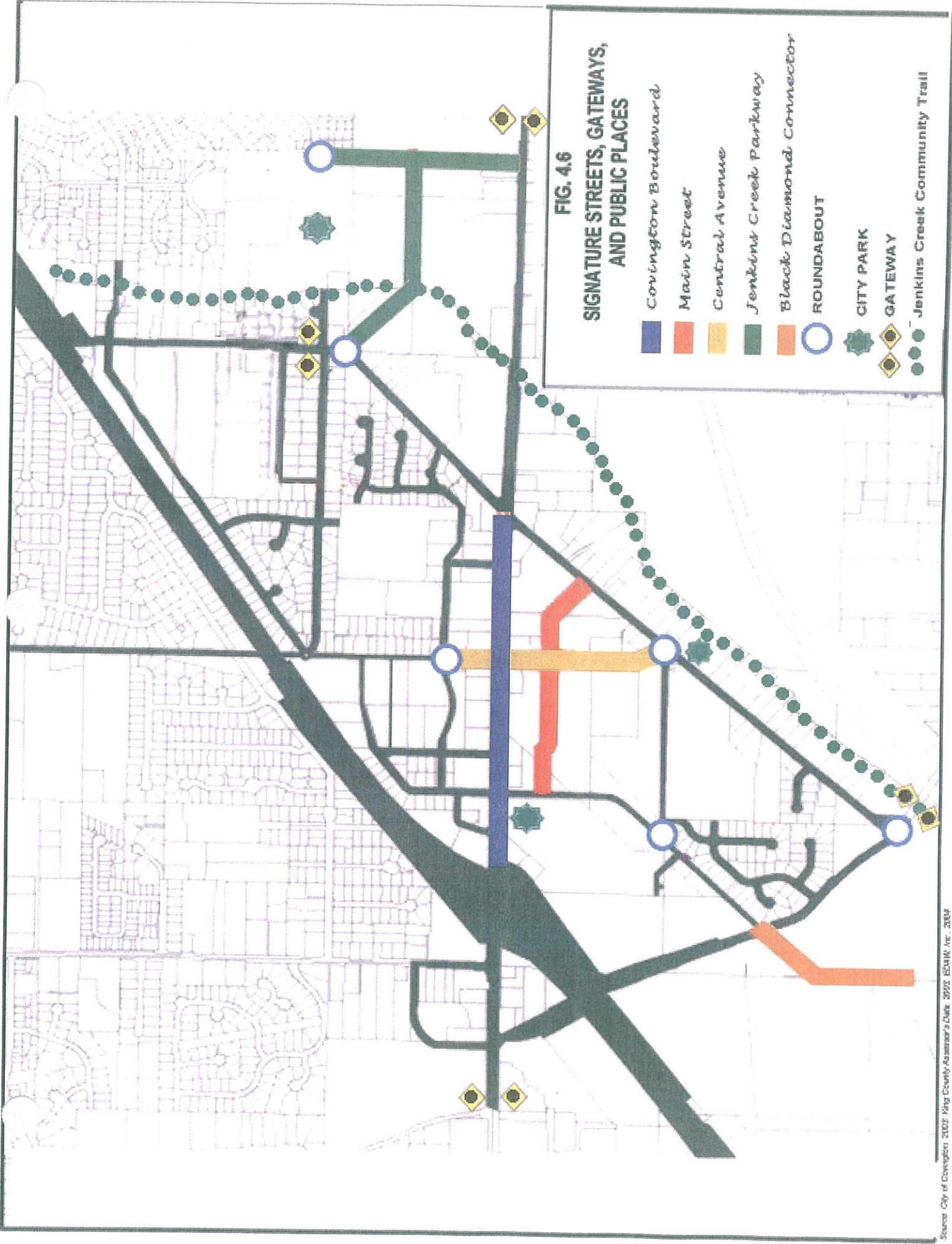


**FIG. 4.5**

**Staff Recommended Downtown Road Network**

- Staff Recommended New Roads
- 2045 Long Range Roadway Planning
- Roundabout





**FIG. 4.6**  
**SIGNATURE STREETS, GATEWAYS,**  
**AND PUBLIC PLACES**

- Covington Boulevard
- Main Street
- Central Avenue
- Jenkins Creek Parkway
- Black Diamond Connector
- ROUNDABOUT
- CITY PARK
- GATEWAY
- Jenkins Creek Community Trail