



**I-375  
Peer Review  
Report**

**Part II  
EVALUATION  
Interchange and  
Boulevard Evaluation**

**November 2024**



## Acknowledgments

*Prepared for*  
Downtown Detroit Partnership

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*Sponsored by*  
The Kresge Foundation

## Background

Detroit is embarking on a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address the damage created by the construction of I-375 by replacing the highway with a surface street reconnected to the City's street grid. In September of 2022, following nine years of initial feasibility and planning work, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) received a grant of \$105 million from the federal government's INFRA (Nationally Significant Multimodal Freight and Highway Projects) Program to support the transformation of I-375, and the department engaged a team led by HNTB to further planning and design efforts. The project's scope is to remove the I-375 freeway and open a new at-grade surface connection from I-75 through Downtown Detroit and the Detroit Riverfront with the opportunity to reconnect neighborhoods including Lafayette Park and Eastern Market and, importantly, what remains of the former Paradise Valley and Black Bottom neighborhoods, which suffered historical harms from urban renewal and were further divided by the original construction of the I-375 freeway. The construction for the project is scheduled to start in 2025 and is projected to take three years to complete.

The City of Detroit and MDOT are to be commended for moving forward with a project aimed at restoring these severed connections and furthering a project that could have a transformational impact on Detroit. It is estimated that more than 43,000 Black residents and over 300 Black businesses were displaced through urban renewal slum clearance beginning in the early 1950s, alongside the construction of I-375, which was built between 1959-1964. The removal of this 1950s highway represents a generational opportunity to repair the historic urban fabric of Downtown and thereby improve the safety, economic, environmental and social health of residents, workers and businesses. Additionally, the project provides an opportunity for city leaders to not only acknowledge past harms to Black Detroiters, but to design and implement the new street and excess land system in a manner that recognizes and creates opportunities for household,

business and community wealth, and neighborhood cultural heritage.

During the spring and summer of 2023, many questions remained about how the project would deliver on its promise of safe and restorative reconnection in a way that encourages growth, repair, and a safer environment for all users of the roadway. Concerns included reliance on pre-pandemic traffic counts that did not reflect current driving patterns and a 20-year growth forecast that was not aligned with projected development. These considerations led to an interchange and boulevard design that were oversized and did not help to achieve the reconnective or restorative goals of the project. Additionally, there were concerns within the community regarding the economic and environmental impacts of the project during construction.

After hearing these concerns, Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP), together with MDOT and the City, initiated a Peer Review process over the course of 8-months. MDOT has worked with city partners and the Peer Review team to respond to concerns and further revise the boulevard and interchange design. Most notably, in late 2023, MDOT took new traffic counts and revised growth projections in alignment with Peer Review recommendations for reduced travel lanes and smaller intersections, thereby improving pedestrian safety and access, maximizing connectivity for all modes of travel, and creating more feasible development parcels.

## Peer Review Scope

The Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP), with support from The Kresge Foundation, retained a nationally-recognized consultant team to conduct a Design Peer Review process. The consulting team includes urban american city (urbanAC), Toole Design Group and HR&A Advisors, Inc., bringing expertise in urban design, transportation engineering, and economic analysis respectively. Working in partnership with MDOT and the City of Detroit, the purpose of this Peer Review was to help inform DDP's response to current roadway design and propose recommendations for improvements to be shared with MDOT, City of Detroit, Downtown stakeholders, and the public. The scope of the Peer Review included three key components:

- (1) Surfacing the potential for inclusive and reparative land use and redevelopment of the 20-30 acres of excess land that will be created by the highway removal;
- (2) Evaluating the proposed street design from an engineering and urban design lens; and
- (3) Assessing the potential economic impacts of the project, during and after construction, together with compiling potential construction mitigation strategies designed to lessen displacement and significant economic loss.

From this Peer Review process, the team has created three report deliverables to document key findings:

### **Part I - Opportunity**

#### *A Vision to Reconnect, Restore & Repair*

Provides the team's discovery, analysis and opportunities for realizing a truly reconnected and restorative Downtown. This includes an exploration of three different land-use concepts that illustrate the importance of contextualizing and coordinating key street design decisions with the land-use planning process.

### **Part II - Evaluation *Interchange and Boulevard Evaluation***

Summarizes the team's understanding of MDOT's project scope, provides a critical review of MDOT's February 2024 interim refinement as well as MDOT's May 2024 public refinement, and provides design recommendations.

### **Part III - Mitigation *Mitigation Framework***

Outlines economic impact, key opportunities and strategies to address the construction impacts for the project area's businesses and residents.

## Peer Review Part II - Evaluation Scope Overview

The process for the team's Peer Review of MDOT's interchange and street design was structured as a working collaboration between DDP, MDOT, HNTB, the City of Detroit Department of Planning and Development and the Mayor's Office. DDP and its consultant team (urban american city, Toole Design and HR&A) worked through three phases of discovery, evaluation, and strategy, conducting five work sessions and numerous meetings with State and City partners between December 2023 and August 2024. During this process, draft Peer Review findings were periodically shared with MDOT, HNTB, and the City team. The partners and consultants utilized the following objectives for the Peer Review process:

- (1) Examine the alignment between the project's stated goals, the community's input, and the proposed design
- (2) Independently review and potentially challenge project assumptions, the planning process, and the proposed design
- (3) Ascertain the degree to which community comments have been heard, addressed and resolved
- (4) Propose alternative possibilities
- (5) Make every effort to work within established project milestones and schedules
- (6) Be collaborative and transparent

## Peer Review Context and Limitations

The Peer Review process comes at a crucial time in the project as MDOT and the City of Detroit are moving into the next phase of implementation by retaining a progressive design-build contractor. This contractor will move the design process beyond its 30% completion stage, enabling the formal obligation of current funding by September 2025. As such, some of the limitations of this Peer Review include:

- **Timing:** The timing of review comes on the heels of years of project design and engagement, and began just months before the issuance of the MDOT Progressive Design Build RFP.
- **Engagement:** In an effort to not further confuse the public with multiple engagement efforts, this peer review did not conduct any public engagement. The team conducted four stakeholder listening sessions as a way to capture the major concerns of different groups, and reviewed documentation from past public engagement.
- **Design Criteria:** MDOT roadway design criteria prioritized vehicle level of service and freeway access criteria over street design features that result in more vibrant walkable urban places.
- **Unifying Vision:** Several individual areas surrounding the project have a vision or framework plans, but there was no unifying transportation, land use or development vision for the greater downtown area.
- **Grounding Definitions:** No unifying definition or criteria by which to measure the existence or effectiveness of reparative or restorative outcomes.

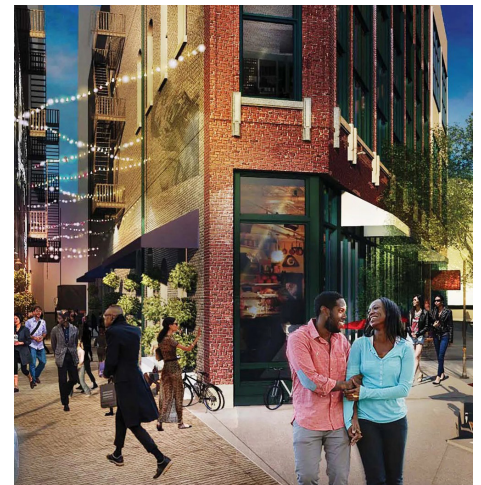


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## Guiding Principles

The Peer Review team wanted to create a set of foundational values that would keep the peer review evaluation and corresponding recommendations grounded in community desires and concerns. The team’s discovery

process included a review of public comments to date for the project and allowed the team to understand key themes that were emerging around public concerns and goals for the project. These themes helped form the following six principles that the team adopted for the review process:



### Inspire the Future of Mobility

- Be the restorative + progressive model for highway removal
- Diversion + safe speeds = more access for people and vehicles
- Prioritize pedestrians
- Design local streets (network) for local trips
- Enable future development and mobility vision and opportunities

### Honor, Repair and Restore Black Bottom Legacy

- Repair past harms (urban, cultural, and economic)
- Minimize future harms – near and long term
- Make visible the cultural significance of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley communities
- Rebuild black ownership and wealth

### Build for a Livable and Walkable Core

- Design for a human scaled greater downtown
- Make places not projects
- Develop a comprehensive vision for Greater Downtown’s development and mobility
- Plan for green (infrastructure and public open space)





### Catalyze the Market

- Recognize more land alone will not create value
- Right-size growth projections for changing live, work, play needs
- Re-establish a walkable urban grid (street + block pattern)
- Plan for diverse needs to fuel neighborhood and citywide growth
- Make the market by making a place



### Make Sustainable Investments

- Align cost/benefits to benefit Detroiters and Detroit's today and tomorrow
- Honor connection, safety (pedestrian + motorist) and restorative goals of funding sources
- Plan for climate adaptation and environmental repair



### Practice Inclusive Participation

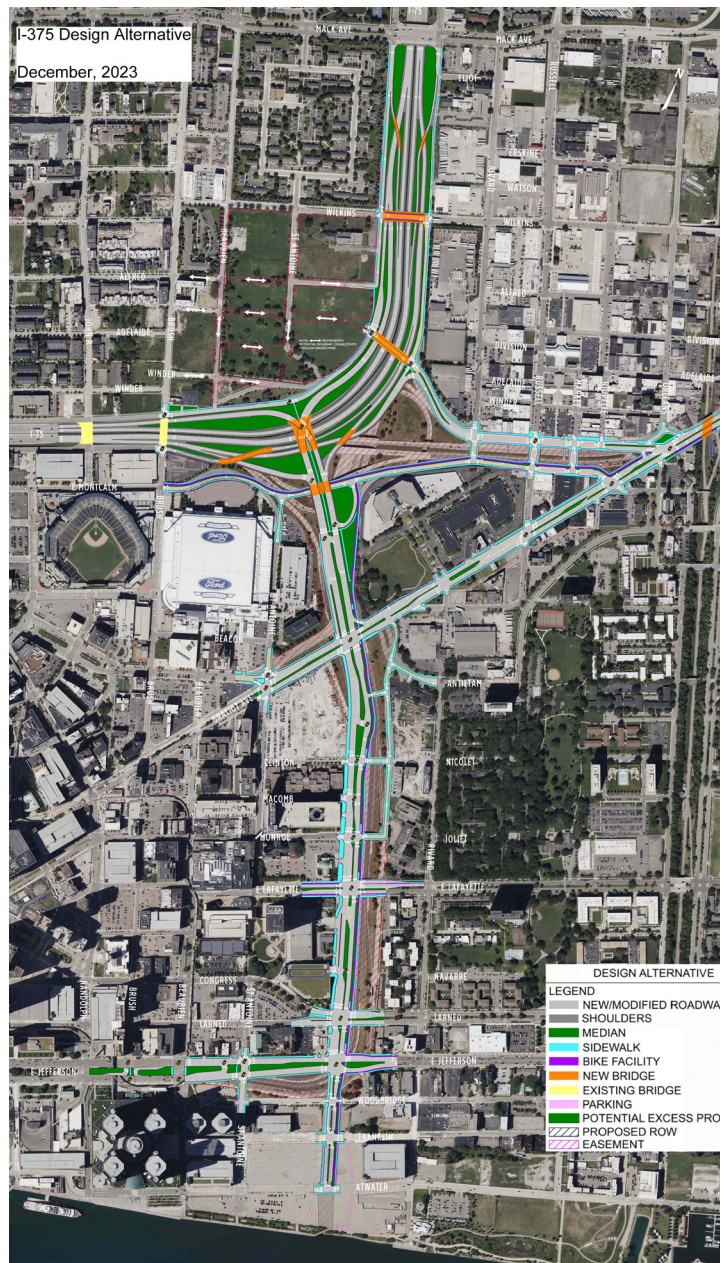
- Model community engagement processes that do not repeat past harms
- On the front end of the process – develop an engagement process for the design that is non-extractive
- On the back end of our work – unearth community desires and around land ownership and governance

## Evaluation Process

The Peer Review evaluation included a detailed documentation of MDOT's design process, assumptions, and engineering alternatives. The Peer Review team reviewed and analyzed historic and current material provided by MDOT using 32 unique evaluation criteria under the following six evaluation categories:

- 1) Project Scoping
- 2) Community Engagement
- 3) Mobility Philosophy
- 4) Street Design Criteria
- 5) Land Use and Development Design Criteria
- 6) Implementation

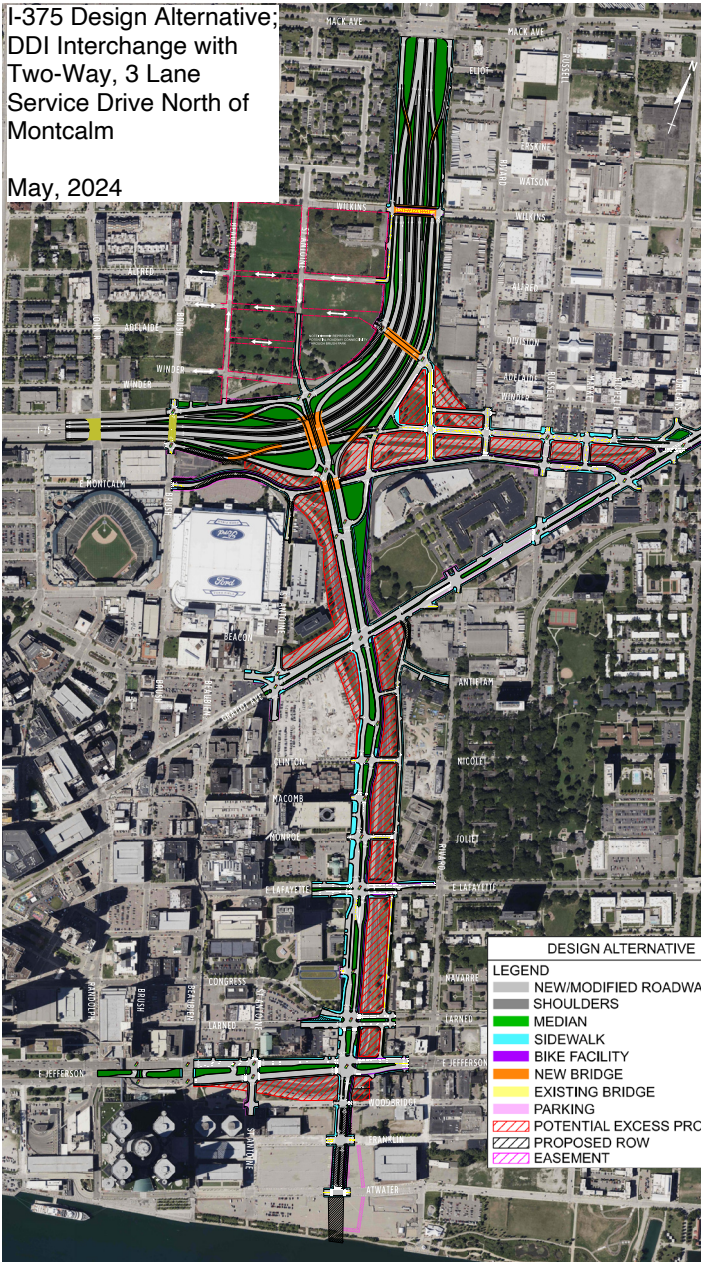
The team's evaluation began with MDOT's Preferred Design Alternative, dated December 2023. Between December 2023 and January 2024, the team reviewed the MDOT project documents and past plans, traffic models, and design drawings to provide an evaluation of the 2023 street and interchange proposed design. Between February and March 2024, the team prepared a series of alternative mobility and land use concepts for the street, interchange and excess land parcels. During this period, the team met with the MDOT, HNTB and the City of Detroit team to review various design refinements developed by HNTB in response to the team's alternative design concepts and review comments. A second review was conducted by the Peer Review team of MDOT's March 2024 refinements to both the interchange and street design. A third and final review was conducted in August of 2024 during an Engineering Workshop with members of the Peer Review team, HNTB, MDOT, the City and DDP, where the group evaluated the feasibility of the proposed proximate interchange design scheme. The Peer Review November 2024 Recommended Interchange and Boulevard Layout was developed by the Peer Review team as a recommended layout, but this has not been approved by MDOT. The next two pages document the evolution of the different design schemes.



MDOT's 2023 Design Alternative

I-375 Design Alternative,  
DDI Interchange with  
Two-Way, 3 Lane  
Service Drive North of  
Montcalm

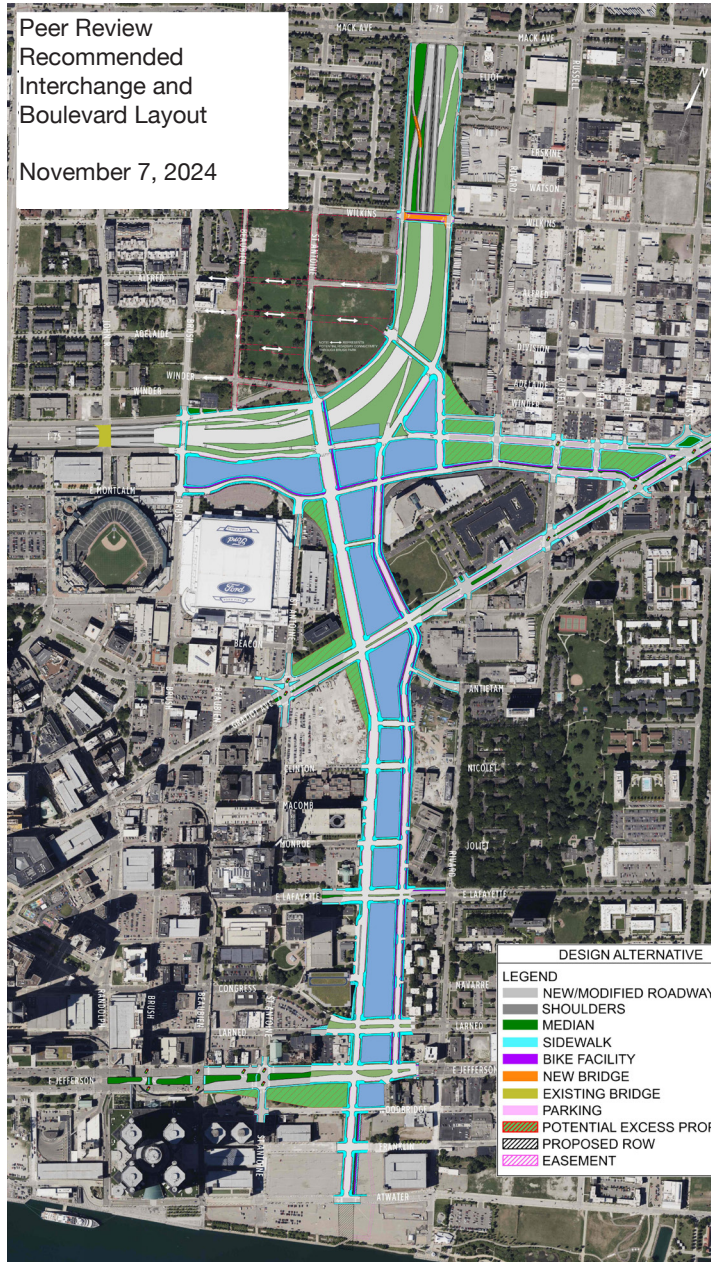
May, 2024



MDOT's May 2024 Revised Alternative

Peer Review  
Recommended  
Interchange and  
Boulevard Layout

November 7, 2024



Peer Review November 2024 Recommended Interchange and Boulevard Layout\*

\*Not approved by MDOT

## Key Conclusions

From the evaluation process, the Peer Review team summarized a set of high-level conclusions and recommendations intended to guide the design refinement, land use planning and public engagement process. The four key conclusions are summarized below and over the next three pages.

1. Revise the roadway and interchange design to achieve reconnective and reparative goals by restoring a pedestrian-scaled local street network and ensuring that excess land created by the project maximizes existing and new land development potential.
2. Mobilize to create a transformative vision through thoughtful project delivery and coordination across public-private sectors.
3. Ensure that reconnective, reparative and restorative outcomes are considered priority with all aspects of the project.
4. Continue to develop a broad engagement process and communications plan to inform decision making.

### 1. Revise the roadway and interchange design to achieve reconnective and reparative goals by restoring a pedestrian-scaled local street network and ensuring that excess land created by the project maximizes existing and new land development potential.

- **Revise the interchange design to match the Peer Review November 2024 Recommended Interchange.** The interchange should be redesigned from a diverging diamond interchange to the Peer Review Recommended interchange to better reconnect the urban street grid and maximize the creation of developable excess land parcels.
- **Embrace Streets for People.** Reconnecting the historic street grid and maximizing development potential for excess land (to accommodate housing and business) is reparative. Removal of the highway creates a welcome return of a Downtown reconnected to the surrounding residential and mixed-use neighborhoods. Maximizing reconnection to the existing urban street grid provides an opportunity to return to a walkable neighborhood and one connected to other areas of the Downtown. Streets for People should be embraced in the implementation of the design for this project.
- **Restore the street network.** The removal of I-375 offers a generational opportunity to repair the urban grid at the juncture of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods. A revised interchange design will make additional connections over I-75 possible, which will result in a safer, more walkable and bikeable environment that supports urban-scaled development and vibrant ground floor street life.
- **Further reduce the boulevard width** by adopting more flexible traffic level-of-service standards and considering increased traffic diversion in order to shorten pedestrian crossing distances. This will result in a design that prioritizes people and vibrant street life.

## 1. Revise the roadway and interchange design to achieve reconnective and reparative goals by restoring a pedestrian-scaled local street network and ensuring that excess land created by the project maximizes existing and new land development potential. (cont.)

- **Treat all streets as vibrant, pedestrian-friendly streets.** Design the new street east of the boulevard to provide continuous mobility and circulation between I-75 and Jefferson, reduce pressure on the boulevard, and offer parking adjacent to newly created parcels. It is important that the new street closest to the neighborhood not become another “service drive” that invites developers to treat the street more like an alley for loading docks, deliveries and parking garage entrances. The existing buildings and residences, as well as future developments along the new street on both sides of the excess land, deserve a new street that is active, vibrant and well designed to support pedestrian activity and the viability of future ground floor uses. This design will also need to consider community concerns to not have more traffic diverted into the community as a result of the new boulevard design.
- **Put trees where people are.** Tree-lined sidewalks are just as beautiful and more functional than a narrow median. Narrow center medians don’t provide enough functional space for pedestrians and activities and are more subject to vehicular incidents. Devoting more sidewalk space adjacent to buildings for sustainable landscapes with trees, heat-resistant planting and bioretention zones can help reduce heat islands and increase flood protection, as well as increase property values, promote better ground floor tenancy/revenues and make people feel safer on the street.

## 2. Mobilize to create a transformative vision through thoughtful project delivery and coordination across public-private sectors.

- **Set a table for cross-sectoral visioning, project delivery and accountability.** MDOT has begun a once-in-a-lifetime initiative to reconnect the urban grid of Downtown Detroit to its surrounding neighborhoods and by doing so, restore and repair the community, and economic and cultural losses that have long scarred the City. Together the resident, business, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors believe in the promise of what removing I-375 can create and are willing to come together with the State to ensure the project realizes a transformative impact for the City’s current and future economy, current and future residents and displaced families and businesses.
- **Consider an “executive roadmap” for all aspects of the project** that includes a clear description of the full integrated scope, schedule and milestones required to deliver all project components (design, planning, procurement, construction, construction mitigation) to be delivered by all project partners, including MDOT, City of Detroit and other participating agencies.
- **Create a Greater Downtown Transportation and Mobility Vision to inform future highway removal projects.** City and State leaders have a generational opportunity to create a vision plan for the future of mobility in Downtown Detroit. The City’s land-use study should include a robust transportation vision that includes I-75 and public transportation and more. As the City enters the next phase of the I-375 design, there is an opportunity to create a new, forward-thinking vision for Downtown mobility, which can acknowledge the many problems associated with the past practices of auto-centric design.

### 3. Ensure that reconnective, reparative and restorative outcomes are considered priority with all aspects of project development and implementation (design, construction, mitigation, future land use and development).

- **Include reconnective/reparative/restorative outcomes in design, construction, future land use, development, and economic participation.** For example: Work to restore and reverse population loss and acknowledge the area's unique Black and local cultural identity, explore collective ownership models for excess land, design and source funding for wealth-building opportunities, including for Black Bottom/Paradise Valley descendants, that help to retain and attract Black Detroiters. With this project, Detroit has an opportunity to be the first city to lead on near-term opportunities for big restorative and reparative wins.
- **Construction must minimize short- and long-term harm.** A transportation infrastructure project of this scale will be lengthy, loud and disruptive to businesses and residents. A comprehensive program of construction mitigation strategies, implemented by a cross-sector group of state, city and business support agencies, will be required to contain and minimize short- and long-term economic and environmental impacts of construction.

### 4. Continue to develop a broad engagement process and communications plan to inform decision making.

- **Reset and expand the strategy for engagement and communications.** As the project moves into the next phases of design, planning and implementation, and as additional community sector partners are becoming more actively engaged, now is the time to reset and expand the strategy and tactics needed to execute effective public engagement and communications. This project should have an open and comprehensive strategy to build trust with the public and ensure that all aspects of next phase planning, design and construction mitigation include meaningful opportunities for community input, co-creation and validation.
- **Rebuild and strengthen trust and transparency.** The repair of relationships between government and its citizens is an ongoing effort and requires intentional focus, time and a multi-pronged strategy of methods and tactics. A clearer and more elaborate set of tactics will be needed to deepen relationships and trust with local communities (residents and businesses) about how they can engage in feedback, decisions and an understanding of how and when decisions are made.

## Changes to Date

The following represent changes to the roadway design that MDOT has committed to make over the course of the Peer Review process through community input and the recommendations of the Peer Review team.

### **1. Traffic Volumes and Growth Projections.**

In response to feedback that using traffic demand data conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic to design the new boulevard and interchange created an oversized system, MDOT conducted new traffic counts for the project area. The results showed reductions in traffic volume projections that in turn could support the downsizing of right-of-way and interchange design.

**2. Boulevard Right-of-Way Design.** The current boulevard design schemes have reduced the street width from 9 travel and turns lanes to as low as 4-6 lanes of travel, including reducing double left and right turn lanes along the corridor.

**3. Design Speeds.** The design speeds for the boulevard have been reduced based on the Dynamic Traffic Assignment (DTA) modeling with a 30-mph posted speed on the boulevard.

**4. Intersection Configuration.** Proposed interchange design considers revising from a high volume divergent diamond configuration to a tight-diamond configuration, influenced by the Peer Review proximate interchange design that minimizes long, high-speed ramps and cut-and-fill construction.

**5. Brush Park Connectivity and Safety.** Current design revisions extend the boulevard to the Brush Park neighborhood, creating a new connection to Mack Avenue and the Detroit Medical Center, with the potential for additional pedestrian and bike improvements over the interchange crossing.

**6. Developable Excess Land Parcels.** Recent boulevard and interchange revisions have created a more

compact urban street grid configuration, that in turn creates a greater number of development parcels overall as well as a greater number of parcel sizes that can support a range of housing, commercial, institutional and cultural uses of varying densities.

**7. Restored Eastern Market Street Grid.** Recent design revisions reestablish the street grid at Eastern Market along the former Gratiot connector that help to improve land development potential and district walkability.

**8. Montcalm Pedestrian Improvements.** Montcalm street creates a more pedestrian-scaled connection between Eastern Market and the Downtown/stadiums.

**9. New Bumped-Out On-Street Parking on Gratiot.** Bumpouts will decrease pedestrian crossing distances as intersections and retained on-street will support small businesses.

## Remaining Areas for Design Refinement

The Peer Review team believes there are still remaining areas of design refinement to be made after MDOT brings on its progressive design-build team. These changes include and are summarized on the Peer Review November 2024 Interchange and Boulevard Layout (see page 11):

**1. Interchange Reconfiguration.** Explore a tighter, smaller footprint interchange geometry that helps to reduce speeds, takes up less space and reduces overall costs.

**2. Interchange Ramp Weaving/Merging concerns.** Explore options that eliminate some of the braided ramps in order to reduce the footprint and cost.

**3. Interchange Ramp and I-75 Lane Design Speed.** Study highway and ramp curve geometries to help reduce ramp and I-75 travel lane design speed and alleviate some weaving and merging concerns, and potentially remove some braided ramps.

**4. Eastern Local Street Design.** Redesign the new street that will border the existing Lafayette Park communities and the new excess land parcels. This is currently designed to function as a “service road,” rather than a small-scaled neighborhood street with pedestrian sidewalks, on-street parking and the potential for ground-floor commercial uses.

**5. Montcalm/Boulevard Grade-separated versus At-grade Intersection.** Consider whether Montcalm should be below the boulevard grade or at-grade. Potential benefits of an at-grade street include improved pedestrian access and greater redevelopment potential for the land across from Ford Field.

**6. Brush Street Bridge.** Potential for the reconstruction of the Brush Street bridge to improve connectivity between Brush Park and Downtown in coordination with the I-75 Cap project.

**7. Number of Travel Lanes required on Boulevard.**

Consider additional lane reductions on the boulevard based on the DTA modeling with a 30-mph posted speed on the boulevard. This in particular could provide further lane reductions at the Gratiot intersection.

**8. Gratiot Intersection.** Consider the elimination of the Michigan lefts south of Gratiot. This revision would provide a more intuitive connection for the Gratiot approach from Downtown, as Michigan lefts are not common in Downtown Detroit other than Jefferson Avenue, which does not have a good safety record. The removal of the Michigan left south of Gratiot would also allow for a tighter cross section and would provide excess land parcels that are more favorable and economical for redevelopment.

**9. Cross-Boulevard Bicycle connections.** The Peer Review team strongly recommends accommodating bike lanes on east-west streets across the new boulevard where intersections could be configured to eventually allow fully protected crossing for people and biking in all directions.

**10. Bicycle Lane signalization.** The Peer Review team recommends further study of bike lanes on both sides of the boulevard in the direction of vehicular traffic as the safest option (as shown in the MassDOT Separated Bicycle Lane design guide) over signalizing two-way bicycle lanes.

**11. Sidewalk widths.** Provide adequate sidewalk width on both sides of the west boulevard and new east side street for a better pedestrian environment.



