

# Chapter 5: Downtown Bemidji

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Photo credit: Aaron Eickhorst



Photo credit: True North Bemidji

# VISION

Downtown Bemidji as the heart of the community and the center of business life and culture, providing amenities and services year-round for residents, students, and visitors.

## Introduction

Downtown Bemidji is the social and economic engine that will drive long-term redevelopment. As a vibrant, pedestrian-oriented central district that defines the character and spirit of Bemidji, it is the heart of the city.

## Streetscape Components

Downtown Bemidji has many strengths, including a vibrant pedestrian area that connects downtown with Library Park and a diverse mix of retail and restaurants. Downtown Bemidji undertook a significant reinvestment program in the 1980's that included a streetscape project and the Union Square development. The streetscape project incorporated both quality design and durable materials. The paving surfaces, pedestrian-scale streetlights, street landscaping, public art installations, informational kiosks, permanent seating areas, and bike racks continue to provide an attractive public destination. The Urban Square project included Main Street on the north side of 2nd Street between Paul Bunyan Drive and Beltrami Avenue.

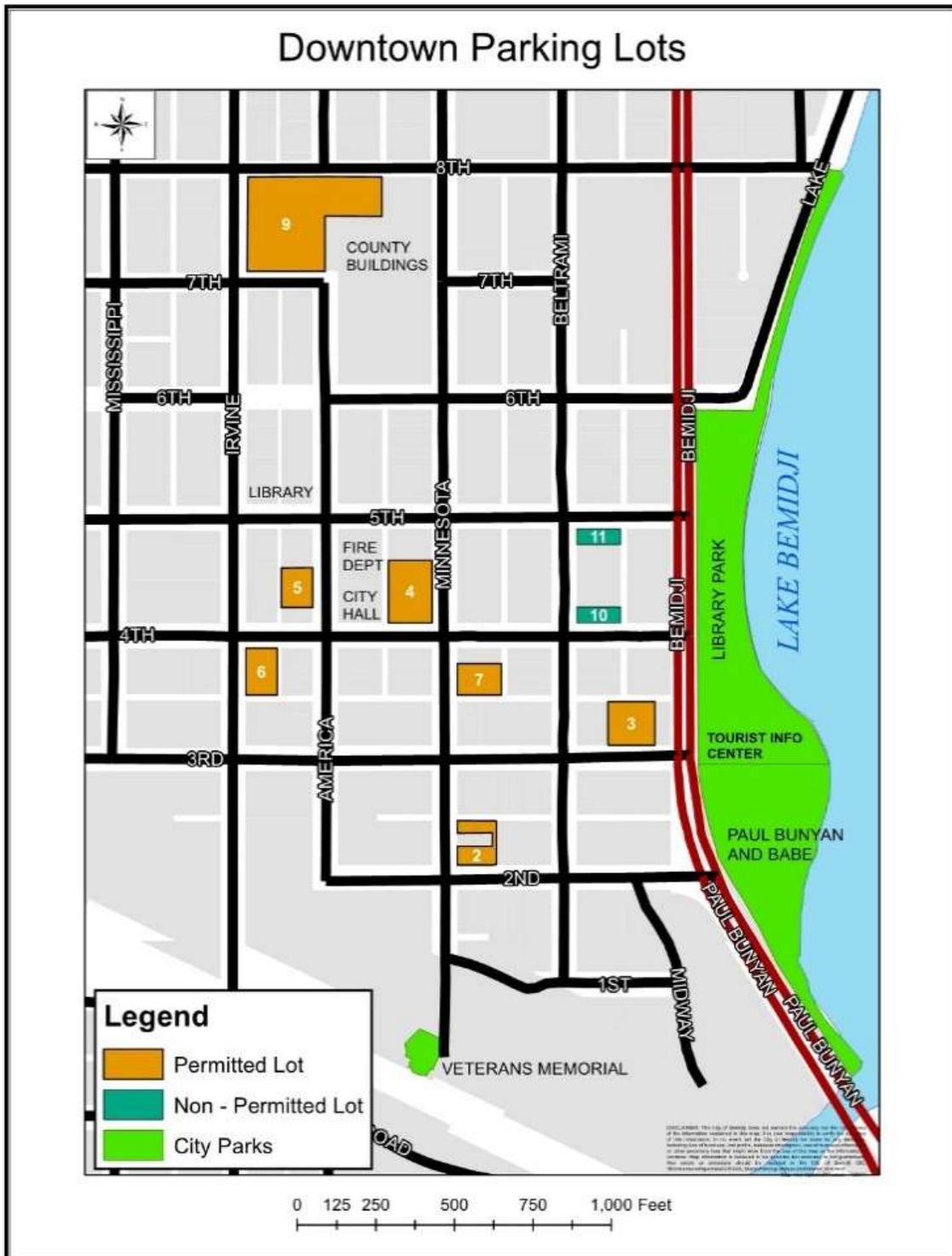


Photo credit: MPR News

## On-Street Parking and Parking Lots

On-street parking is available within the urban renaissance district of Downtown, otherwise there are limited parking spaces in Downtown Bemidji. Permits are required in the permitted lots and can be purchased through the Bemidji Downtown Alliance. **Figure 5** shows the lots that are permitted and non-permitted in Downtown Bemidji

Figure 5: Downtown Parking Lots



Source: Bemidji Downtown Alliance, 2013

## Downtown Culture

Downtown Bemidji is a destination on its own in the Greater Bemidji Area, offering a variety of goods ranging from an assortment of boutiques, gift shops, general retail services, restaurants, and coffee shops. It incorporates the area between Lake Bemidji and Irvine Avenue, from the abandoned Burlington Northern Railroad Station north to 6th Street. The commercial “main streets” of Downtown Bemidji are north-south Beltrami Avenue and east-west 3rd Street, lined with one- to two-story retail buildings built to the street property line. Downtown's character changes



Photo credit: Choice Therapy

west of Minnesota Avenue, where office use is more prevalent, and buildings typically have larger floor space with independent on-street parking. Paul Bunyan Park creates an attractive public lakefront, defined by Bemidji Avenue (Highway 197). Development on the west side of Bemidji Avenue, with small shops, convenience stores, a drive-in bank, surface parking, and several larger-scale buildings, present a relatively undefined frontage view of Lake Bemidji.

## Rail Corridor District

The Rail Corridor District (Subject Property) is located just south of Downtown Bemidji. The Subject Property extends approximately 300 feet north of the existing railroad tracks, east of Park Avenue, and west of the Mississippi River. The City of Bemidji is interested in revitalizing the Subject Property into a vital district that completes Downtown by adding new uses and attractions (Central City Plan 2009).

The proposed use would include mixed use commercial/residential development with high-end retail shopping and a 60-unit residential facility. The site needs to be investigated for potential environmental limitations before such a development can be built.

The Subject Property consists of four parcels totaling 20.53 acres (Beltrami County GIS). The area was historically characterized by: as many as five different operating railroad companies at one-time and their associated tracks, depots, and numerous businesses, such as:

- warehouses,
- feed mills,
- flour mills,
- creameries,
- hardware stores,
- grocery stores,
- bottling companies,
- lumber yards,
- mills,
- auto repair facilities,
- saloons,
- restaurants,
- hotels,
- residential dwellings,
- bulk petroleum facilities, and
- fueling stations.



Photo credit: GBAJPB

## Downtown Bemidji Strengths

- A unique sense of place.
- Summer and winter events link to Downtown Bemidji through Paul Bunyan Park.
- The Bemidji Downtown Association is an active group promoting downtown.
- Excellent food and entertainment opportunities.
- Diverse business opportunities.
- Potential for redevelopment including the riverfront and rail corridor.

- Strong arts and culture scene.
- A safe, walkable, and compact downtown.
- Low vacancy rates with quick turn arounds as space becomes available.

## Downtown Bemidji Challenges

- Highway 197 divides Downtown Bemidji creating a physical and mental barrier.
- Need for on-street parking reduces opportunities for complete street projects.
- The “Rail Corridor District” is a current homeless corridor.
- Turnover of businesses.

## Downtown Bemidji Objectives and Strategies

### Objective 5.1: Promote a “Mixed-Use” Downtown Bemidji to Preserve and Encourage Diversity in Business and Housing Opportunities

Encourage diversity within Downtown Bemidji to continue to enhance “mixed-use” opportunities and provide character and uniqueness. Expand Downtown with community input to ensure needs for commercial and

residential space are adequately distributed throughout new development.

1. **Support initiatives and redevelopment designed to increase Downtown housing.** The community will continue to provide opportunity for housing and commercial uses throughout Downtown Bemidji. When reviewing development projects, it is encouraged to preserve existing housing and explore options for increasing housing. Mixed-use housing can be increased with continued vertical development within Downtown, preserving retail while increasing housing opportunities.
2. **Support and encourage long-range master planning for the rail corridor and inner-city river frontage to meet the needs of the community.** The Rail Corridor District is currently adjacent to parcels that are contaminated due to past uses. It is encouraged to seek resources to remediate contaminated parcels to reestablish the Rail Corridor District as a valuable asset to the community. The adjacent Rail Corridor District and inner-city river frontage is a positive asset. It is

imperative that this area be developed in a driven, community-focused manner.

3. **Increase the density of mixed-use buildings in Downtown Bemidji.** In order to provide opportunities for increased density of commercial and residential uses in the Downtown, allow flexibility when proposals will increase opportunity or diversity for mixed-use options while preserving the character of the downtown.

### **Objective 5.2: Preserve and Enhance Civic Buildings, Public Plazas, Parks, and Gathering Spaces within Downtown**

A market culture with diverse options mixed with community attractions can increase usage of Downtown Bemidji. Supporting good connections to Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox to other community attractions is important to getting pedestrians into Downtown.

1. **Support efforts to increase multi-seasonal outdoor gathering spaces.** Outdoor gathering space for markets, events, and theatres will be encouraged for creating a vibrant and community driven downtown atmosphere. The outdoors is a part of the Northwood's Character and ensuring

Downtown Bemidji has many opportunities for outdoor activities is a part of the downtown culture.

2. **Continue to support spaces for community attractions and events within Downtown. The rail corridor presents opportunity for expansion of downtown with potential for a Riverwalk.** Support of gathering spaces for events and celebrations, art and culture, community attractions, and entertainment will continue to enhance vibrancy, increase usage, and ensure diverse economic opportunity.



Photo credit: Bemidji Pioneer

### Objective 5.3: Preserve and Enhance the Downtown Landscape and Environment

The Downtown story should be a vibrant residential, commercial, and cultural gathering place that is safe and inviting. Continuing to support a well-designed, well-maintained Downtown will encourage residents to live, work, and shop Downtown.

**1. Require interior greenspace to be included in parking areas throughout the Downtown.**

Incorporating greenspace when redeveloping or reconstructing parking areas within downtown will enhance attractiveness and reduce heat island effects.

**2. Promote using projecting signage within Downtown.** The promotion of projecting signage will create a Downtown with the pedestrian in mind rather than the automobile. Projecting signage should give a historic character to Downtown Bemidji, and designs are encouraged to provide visual attraction to pedestrians to continue exploring.



Photo credit: GBAJPB

**3. Encourage the use of public right-of-way for planters, signage, art, and landscaping to expand storefronts and sidewalk service in appropriate locations.** Encouraging the expansion of storefronts through streetscaping and curb appeal can provide space for outdoors sales and outdoor café seating when designed at suitable locations. This will encourage pedestrians to continue exploring throughout Downtown.

- 4. **Encourage off-street parking in Downtown with redevelopment projects.** Development that includes off-street parking enhance the pedestrian walkability of Downtown and reduce dependence on cars. Reducing the dependence for on-street parking could allow for expanding storefronts, increased streetscaping, and improve bicycle travel safety on roadways.



Photo credit: National Association of City Transportation Officials

### **Objective 5.4: The Downtown Will Continue to be the Centerpiece for the Enhancement of Artistic and Cultural Expression**

- 1. **Include the use of markers throughout Downtown to represent historical structures and places.** Ordinances should not hinder the ability for buildings to place signage and markers explaining historic events or cultural expression.
- 2. **Support the process of public arts commission as a means for selecting art and cultural opportunities within Downtown.** Arts and culture are important for a successful Downtown Bemidji. An established public arts commission is an excellent way to support efforts to preserve and increase public art and cultural expression throughout Downtown.