# CROSSROADS REDEVELOPMENT AREA:
## Health Impact Assessment Brief

November 2013

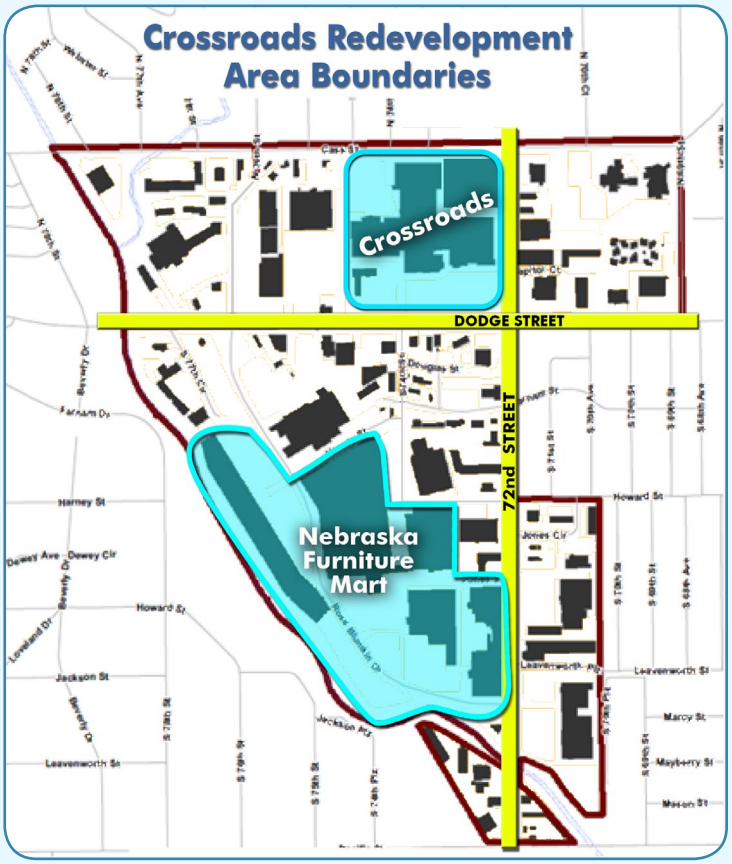
## SUMMARY

Making destinations more vibrant by designing them to be walkable also fights against chronic disease epidemics and rising healthcare costs. Places where walking is inviting and safe improves health by increasing physical activity, reducing stress, and minimizing environmental pollution. The City of Omaha, the developer for the Crossroads Mall site, and nearby residents have all shown support for building a walkable district in the heart of Omaha.

## BACKGROUND

Current visions for the redevelopment of the 45-acre Crossroads Mall site and the surrounding 239-acre district (designated the Crossroads Redevelopment Area – see Map 1) emphasize creating a place that is walkable. The Crossroads Area Redevelopment Plan – which was passed 7-0 by the Omaha City Council – calls for creating a "true mixed-use 24/7 pedestrian friendly destination for the region." The plan outlined by the developer for the Crossroads Mall largely echoes that approach (see below).

Despite this alignment and the general consensus that efforts to revitalize the Crossroads area are needed, the tax-increment financing process, the proposal of a nearby apartment complex, and a public meeting to unveil the Crossroads Area Redevelopment Plan all met with public controversy. As a means to bolster community engagement and pull together relevant scientific evidence, the City of Omaha Planning Department requested that the Douglas County Health Department conduct a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) to better inform implementation decisions for the Crossroads Area Redevelopment Plan.




Map 1: Crossroads Redevelopment Area Boundaries

## CROSSROADS MALL

Despite being located at 72nd and Dodge – one of the busiest intersections in Omaha – the Crossroads Mall has been in decline for years with an occupancy rate now around 30%. It was purchased in 2010 by a local developer, Frank Krejci, with plans to demolish the majority of the current mall site and then redevelop it with a mix of uses including retail, office, housing, and civic facilities including a library branch and park. While the plan has gone through several changes, the most recent version calls for building new side streets that have wide sidewalks, on-street parking, and other pedestrian-friendly amenities.

## ABOUT HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Health Impact Assessments are a collaborative tool that brings together scientific evidence, health expertise, and stakeholder input so that likely health effects can be factored into a decision-making process.

This HIA was conducted through funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Current partners on HIA efforts include the **City of Omaha, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency,** and **Omaha by Design.**

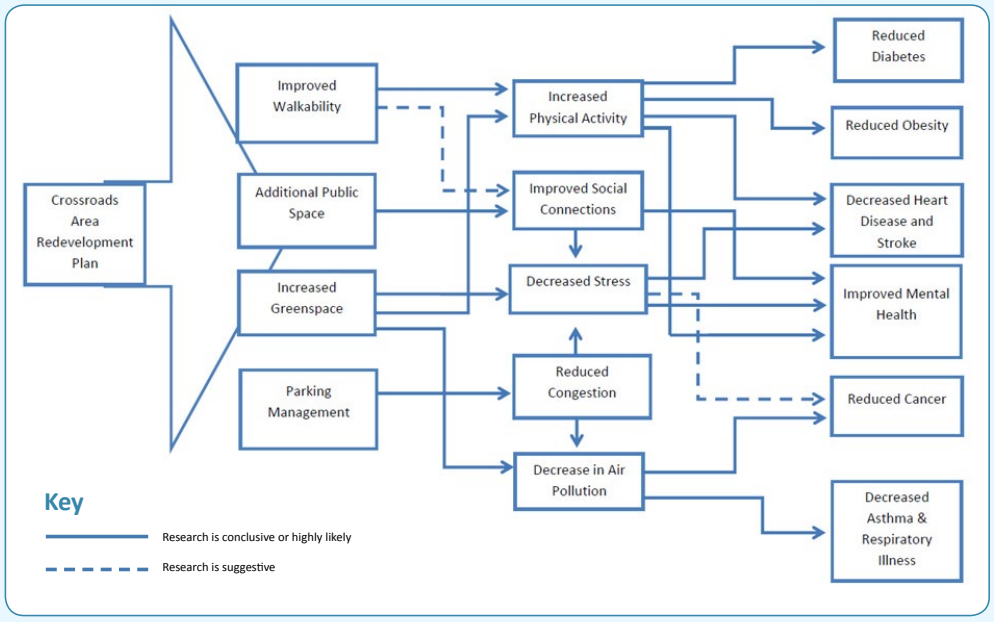
## COMMUNITY INPUT

To determine the priorities of the Health Impact Assessment (HIA), the Douglas County Health Department (DCHD) partnered with Midtown Neighborhood Alliance (MNA), which is an umbrella organization for nearby neighborhood and homeowner groups. On April 23, 2013, residents of nearby neighborhoods came together to develop a "Neighborhood Wish List" that captured their desires for the Crossroads Redevelopment Area (See Appendix A & B for more information). These results were then used for selecting **Walkability, Public Space, Greenspace, and Parking** as the focus areas of the HIA. Despite previous controversy, the vision laid out in the Neighborhood Wish List aligns closely with the Crossroads Area Redevelopment Plan.

## ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT CONDITIONS AND SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

Subsequent research by the Douglas County Health Department and its partners examined the current conditions for these focus areas within the Crossroads Redevelopment Area (See "Current Conditions" on next page). A literature review was also conducted to better forecast how changes to these factors would likely affect health outcomes. This information is summarized in the health pathway diagram and key research findings box below. (For more details on the research, please see Appendix D).

Figure 1: Health Pathway Diagram




## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

- The scientific evidence linking the way places are designed to impacts on physical activity is strong enough that leading public health organizations including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Prevention Council, and the Surgeon General have all emphasized the importance of designing places to be walkable.
- The built environment factors found to most strongly increase walking were related to decreasing the distances between places. These factors included mixing different uses (such as jobs and housing), keeping blocks lengths short, and having a large number of destinations within walking distance.
- Human-scale amenities like ground floor retail, a large number of places to sit and congregate, street trees and awnings for shade, and access to food are key to creating well-used sidewalks and other public spaces.
- Exposure to nature is effective in reducing stress and restoring the ability to focus. This effect is strong enough that scientists can detect stress recovery benefits through just seeing images of nature.
- Using a parking management approach to better balance the supply and demand of parking would likely reduce congestion, decrease heat island effect, and improve air and water quality.

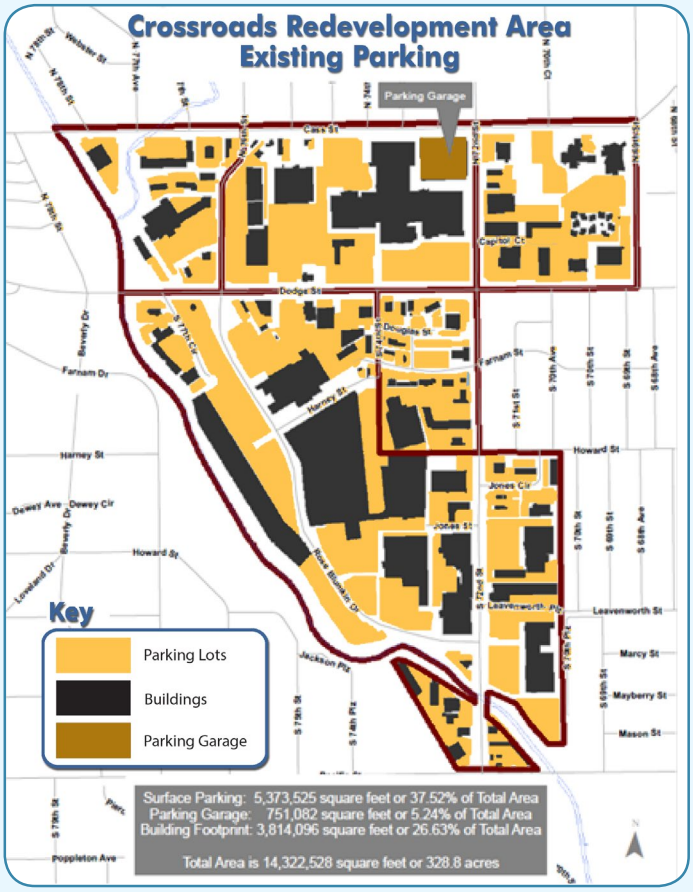
# CURRENT CONDITIONS

**Walkability**

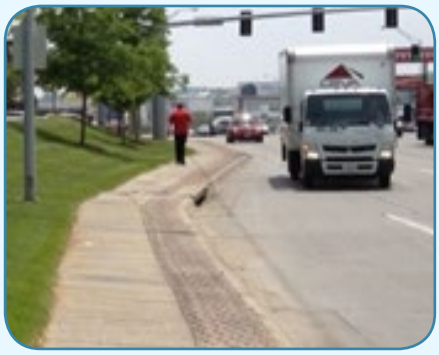
- The primary pedestrian network is along arterials with high-speed and high-volume auto traffic.
    - Over 95,000 vehicles pass through the Dodge-72nd St. intersection each day.
    - Sidewalks are buffered from traffic along the majority of Dodge, but 72nd Street has only a narrow strip of bricks separating the sidewalk from the street (Picture 1).
    - Sidewalks along side streets have segments that are missing, broken, or too narrow to meet ADA compliance (Picture 2).
- Sidewalks are typically separated from buildings by surface parking lots (Picture 3 & 4).
- Block lengths along Dodge and 72nd St. are typically over 400 ft (longer than a football field); curb cuts are frequent.
- Crossing 6-8 lanes of traffic is common at major intersections.
    - Countdown timers are provided.
    - Medians are not designed to serve as pedestrian refuges. (Picture 5)

**Public Space**

- Sidewalks lack sufficient amenities to allow them to function as places to congregate (Pictures 6).
- No prominent plazas, squares, or parks to serve as a public gathering place.
- Spaces for transit (including a Megabus stop) lack amenities and are not well defined.




Map 2: Crossroads Redevelopment Area Existing Parking



Picture 1: Narrow buffer between sidewalk & street

Picture 2: Missing, broken, or narrow sidewalks

Pictures 3 & 4:
Sidewalks separated from buildings by parking lots

Picture 5: Median not designed as pedestrian refuge

Picture 6: Low level of amenities provided by sidewalk

**Greenspace**

- The only major greenspace is the Keystone Trail along the far western edge of the Crossroads Redevelopment Area.
- Additional greenspace is provided through strips of landscaping to soften parking lots and building edges.

**Parking**

- 42% of the land in Crossroads Redevelopment Area is covered by parking (See Map 2 with parking in orange).
- A point-in-time snapshot of the parking occupancy rate done using Google Maps found only 40% of the spaces were being used during the day.
- Virtually no on-street parking is provided.

## KEY DESIGN FEATURES FOR PROMOTING HEALTH

Source: Bellevue, WA Visual Preference Survey

Source: Nathan Norris (Placemakers.com)

Pictures 7 & 8:
Examples of streets with sidewalks that allow for a high level of amenities

While not finalized, the plans for the Crossroads Mall site that have been made public match well with the visions set out in both the Crossroads Area Redevelopment Plan and the Neighborhood Wish List. One aspect is building new side streets that are designed to provide a high level of convenience and safety for people — both as pedestrians and motorists. These streets would place wide sidewalks right next to buildings which allows for a high level of amenities such as ground floor retail, street trees, and café & bench seating (See Pictures 7 & 8). They would also include on-street parking which provides close access to stores as well as a buffer between sidewalks and traffic.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE CROSSROADS AREA REDEVELOPMENT PLAN:

Priority should be given to creating a network of narrower, slower-speed side streets. These streets should be designed to include pedestrian-friendly amenities such as wide sidewalks, street trees, a variety of uses, and on-street parking. This change would be especially valuable between the two anchors in the district (the Crossroads Mall site and Nebraska Furniture Mart).

**Rationale: It is highly unlikely that Dodge and 72nd Street — given their design for high-volume and high-speed traffic — can be made comfortable enough to support a high number of pedestrians. Creating these side streets would also provide alternatives to Dodge, Cass, and 72nd for motorists, which would help reduce congestion.**

A performance goal for parking occupancy should be established in the Crossroads Redevelopment Area. Shared parking and other parking management approaches should be implemented to achieve an occupancy rate that is closer to 70-85%.

**Rationale: With parking currently covering over 40% of the land in the Crossroads Redevelopment Area, a better balance of supply and demand for parking would make more efficient use of land and financial resources (and create health benefits). District-level approaches — as proposed in the Crossroads Area Redevelopment Plan — would be more effective than continuing to focus only on one site at time.**

Revenue generated from parking should be reinvested back into the Crossroads Redevelopment Area. This ongoing source of funding could pay for improvements such as sidewalk repair, new trees and streetlights, and better bicycle and transit facilities. Cities typically create a parking benefit district to accomplish this reinvestment. Nearby residents should be included in determining how these funds would be used most effectively.

**Rationale: Reinvesting parking revenue into an area can lead to a virtuous cycle. The parking revenue pays for public improvements that attract more visitors, which leads to more revenue, which pays for new public improvements. Places like Pasadena, CA and Austin, TX have used this reinvestment strategy to improve the vitality of a neighborhood while also helping to manage congestion.**

DOUGLAS COUNTY Health Department

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