

# **First Courthouse Neighborhood Planning for Community Preservation**



**Content Developed by First Courthouse Neighborhood  
Residents and City of Norman Revitalization Staff**

**PLAN DRAFT**

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# First Courthouse Neighborhood Plan

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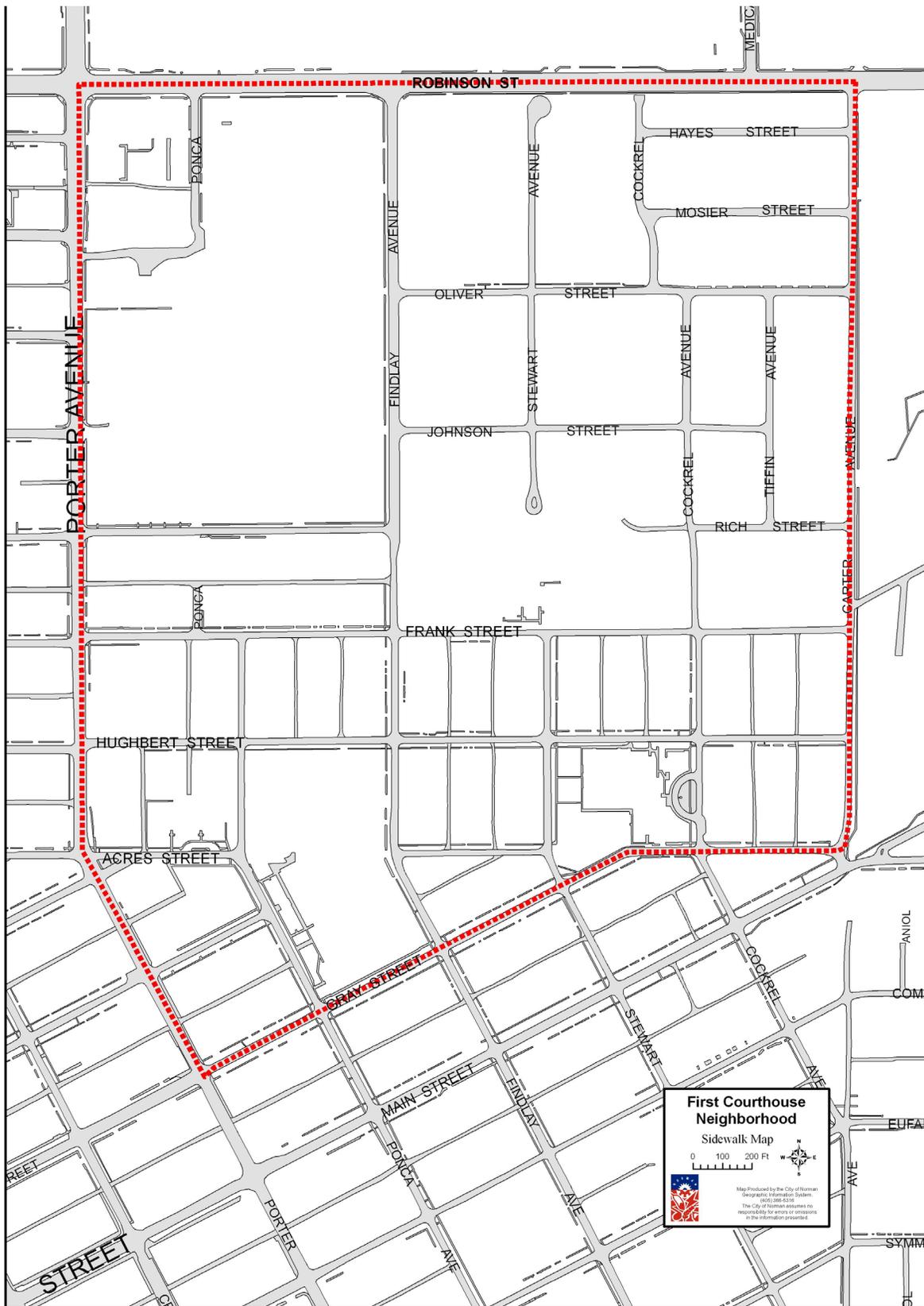


## **Acknowledgements**

The City of Norman Revitalization Staff would like to thank the following people for their assistance in bringing this plan to fruition.....TBD



# Map of First Courthouse Neighborhood





## Executive Summary

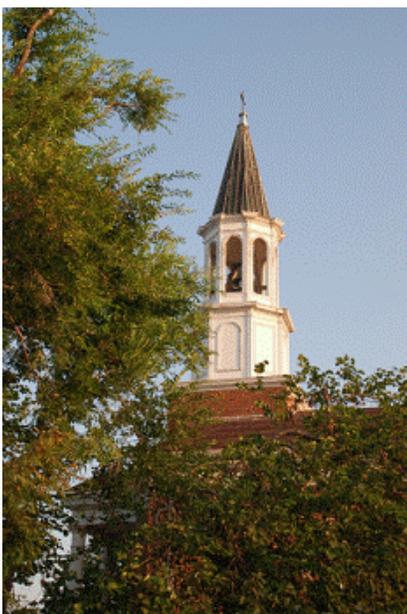
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*The First Courthouse Plan for Neighborhood Preservation* is an update and expansion of the 1990 *First Courthouse Neighborhood Plan*. Over the past three decades, neighborhood stakeholders have met once or twice each year to discuss issues and to review neighborhood goals. They have elected to spend Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds on a variety of infrastructure projects from sidewalks to sewers. Neighborhood meetings during which the contents of this plan were initially developed were held in 2007 and 2008, with infrastructure surveys done in 2009.

### Neighborhood Snapshot

*History of the Name.* Just after Norman's founding in 1889, Cleveland County's first courthouse was built in what would become the First Courthouse Neighborhood. The exact location is a matter of dispute, but many sources agree the courthouse once lay on the site of what is now Jefferson Elementary School at 215 N. Cockrel. When residents formed a neighborhood association in 1974 and were designated as a CDBG area, they wanted their name to reflect the neighborhood's history.

*Land Use.* Like every neighborhood, First Courthouse is characterized by its land use and built form, as well as its physical, social and economic conditions. Land use in the neighborhood is defined by three major patterns: single-family residential, commercial, and institutional. Land use conflicts stemming from Porter Avenue businesses and hospital expansion encroaching into residential blocks have dominated neighborhood concerns for many years. With the City's 2010 adoption of the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan*, which includes the Porter Corridor Zoning Overlay District (PCZOD), establishing a limit line for commercial development, the City hopes that residential owners and business owners alike will have more confidence about the neighborhood's future, which will in turn leverage private investment. The City of Norman will be implementing Plan-recommended streetscape improvements along Porter Avenue as funding becomes available.



For more than 100 years the steeple at St. Joseph's Catholic Church has been a neighborhood beacon and a landmark.

*Encroachment.* Unchecked expansion of commercial or institutional uses into residential areas can be a destabilizing force in neighborhoods. It often negatively affects property values and causes property owners to lose confidence in their investments. This trend has been chronic along Porter Avenue and along the residential edge immediately east of the hospital for decades. With the 2010 adoption of the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan* and the PCZOD, First Courthouse Neighborhood now has a strong tool creating a limit line for commercial expansion and

## Executive Summary, continued

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Longfellow Middle School can be a community gathering place as well as a school.

## Neighborhood Issues



The proximity of Fire Station N° 1 means First Courthouse residents enjoy the best fire department response

Requiring a physical buffer between commercial and institutional land uses and the adjacent residential. This protection should help restore residential property owners' confidence and boost their incentive to reinvest in houses near commercial edges.

*Sense of Place.* First Courthouse Neighborhood possesses an inherently strong *sense of place* with prominent features that shape its form and identity and make it a desirable place to live. This sense of place in First Courthouse is defined by features such as the dominant single-family pattern of residential land use, streets lined by mature trees, the presence of sidewalks, and by the neighborhood's close proximity to Downtown and the Porter Avenue Corridor.

*Infrastructure.* First Courthouse neighborhood is well-served by both physical and civic infrastructure. Physical infrastructure refers to the large-scale network of public services or systems such as water lines, storm and sanitary sewer systems, roads, alleys and sidewalks. Civic infrastructure refers to features such as parks, schools, museums, recreational trails and other public buildings and institutions.

*Neighborhood Quality of Life. Long-term Residents.* First Courthouse Neighborhood has many long-term residents who are deeply connected to their community. However, parts of the neighborhood are experiencing conversions of owner-occupied housing to rental housing, particularly along commercial edges. This trend is often a catalyst for decreasing levels of personal investment; declining housing values, and decreased levels of property maintenance.

*Code Enforcement.* First Courthouse has experienced a slow but steady trend toward poor property maintenance over the past 20-30 years. These trends are often indicators of declining emotional and economic investment in a neighborhood. For many years, First Courthouse participants in annual CDBG meetings have complained about the lack of consistent code enforcement in the area sending a subtle message that nobody cares about the neighborhood.

*Proximity to Community Destinations.* First Courthouse Neighborhood is close to Norman Regional Hospital, doctors' offices, churches, schools, the Porter Avenue commercial corridor, and Downtown Norman. Residents can easily walk or bike to reach many basic services and daily needs, including some of Norman's most popular restaurants. However this convenience comes at a price: increased traffic, noise, encroachment from expanding businesses, and demolition of houses for parking lots.

## **Executive Summary, continued**

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### **Neighborhood Issues**

Lists of neighborhood-generated Assets, Liabilities and Opportunities were grouped into broad issue categories for this plan. Each category includes assets to be protected, liabilities to be corrected, and opportunities that could be developed. First Courthouse Neighborhood issue categories include:

- Physical and Civic Infrastructure
- Neighborhood Investment, Quality of Life & Appearance
- Traffic, Parking & Circulation

*Cyclical Nature of CDBG Projects.* Because CDBG neighborhoods play an active role in prioritizing neighborhood projects, the projects chosen for undertaking strongly reflect resident participation, group dynamics, the aging of infrastructure, and demand vs. urgent need. Over three decades, First Courthouse Neighborhood has moved from cycles of active participation to minimum participation. The neighborhood has also moved through cycles where demand for physical infrastructure improvements was high to cycles where residents prioritized more visible, above-the-ground improvements instead.

### **Neighborhood Plan Concept**

*The First Courthouse Neighborhood Plan* Concept, which may be best summarized as “*Strengthen What We Have,*” identifies six, long-term goals for the neighborhood with objectives that, if implemented, will be very helpful in bringing about the long-term revitalization of one of Norman’s oldest neighborhoods:

#### **GOAL 1: Strengthen Neighborhood Edges**

*Mark clear boundaries that separate Porter Avenue commercial land uses from adjacent residential areas in First Courthouse. A mutually respected edge is critical for peaceful coexistence between commercial and residential land uses.*

#### **GOAL 2: Protect History, Character and Sense of Place**

*Protect the neighborhood’s physical environment that includes blocks of houses and other buildings, the pattern of sidewalks, streets and trees, and proximity to neighborhood goods and services.*

#### **GOAL 3: Strengthen Zoning Protections**

*Support zoning changes that reflect 2025 Plan Land Use Plan recommendations, preserve the single-family residential character of First Courthouse Neighborhood, and promote the peaceful co-existence of adjacent land uses.*

#### **GOAL 4: Improve Traffic and Circulation at Key Locations**

*Calm traffic and improve safety along key streets and at busy intersections. Improve pedestrian access throughout the neighborhood but particularly across Porter Avenue.*

**Executive Summary,  
continued**

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**GOAL 5: Upgrade Neighborhood Infrastructure**

*Make meaningful infrastructure improvements that enhance the neighborhood's quality of life.*

**GOAL 6: Enhance Appearance and Quality of Life**

*Encourage participation in programs that beautify the neighborhood, enhance individual property values, and build a sense of connection between neighbors.*

**Next Steps and Implementation.....TDB**

## What is Neighborhood Planning?

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*neighborhood*— \nay-bər-'huud\ n. a geographically localized community located within a larger city or suburb. Residents of a given neighborhood are referred to as neighbors.

A neighborhood is a geographic location with a resident population and distinguishing physical features. It is a place where people live, work and play. Neighborhoods are the building blocks of cities.

Neighborhood planning is a process by which residents of a community gather to identify assets and agree on priorities for neighborhood improvement, and to devise strategies to achieve their goals. During these conversations, neighbors ask themselves “what is working well in our neighborhood that we want to protect?” and “what is not up to our standards and how can we improve it?” They ask themselves “what is it about this place that draws us here and what will keep us here in the future?”

The *Norman 2025 Land Use and Transportation Plan*, drafted in 2004, recommended the establishment of a neighborhood planning program with a dedicated staff person. The program would be designed to “engage neighborhoods in the Core Area in a participatory planning process to directly address such issues as land use compatibility, parking, circulation, and neighborhood improvements.” The *2025 Plan* also recommends that “The Planning Commission and City Council would adopt each of the neighborhood plans as an element of the City’s Comprehensive Plan.”

Neighborhood planning begins with a physical assessment and documentation of environmental conditions. Planners then meet with neighbors to identify social conditions and neighborhood assets. By articulating goals to protect the physical and social environment, planners help neighbors develop a plan to protect existing assets and to implement desired change. Ideally, neighborhood plans should be updated every five-to-ten years.

The most important goal in neighborhood planning is to develop a strong sense of community connectedness. This means residents know and trust each other, and choose to work together to create real improvements in the neighborhood. By working together to identify community assets and develop a plan for protecting them, neighbors have direct control over their future.

### Neighborhood Planning in Norman



Neighborhood meetings are often held in schools, churches, libraries or other public settings.

## **What is Neighborhood Planning, continued**

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Lastly, in order to be effective and successful, neighborhood planning can only occur in the context of the broader community's values and aspirations. While plan goals may be specific to a neighborhood, those goals must reflect ideas that are supported and strived for by the community as a whole.

The plan concept laid out in the First Courthouse Neighborhood Plan is consistent with the goals and objectives of all of Norman's current major planning initiatives, including: *Norman 2025 Land Use and Transportation Plan*; *Norman Stormwater and Greenbelt Master Plan*; the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan*; *The CDBG Five-Year Consolidated Plan*; *Norman Parks and Recreation Master Plan*, and the Safe Routes to School Initiative.

## History of the Community Development Block Grant Program in Norman 1974-2010

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Beginning in 1974 with a \$206,000 grant , Norman has developed a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program that has targeted infrastructure deficiencies and improving quality of life for homeowners and the community as a whole. During CDBG's 37- year history, the City of Norman has installed over ten miles of water lines, five miles of sewer lines, and nearly 30 miles of sidewalks throughout CDBG neighborhoods. The program has also made significant drainage and street improvements throughout the targeted area.

In addition to infrastructure improvements, CDBG funds have enabled the purchase of over 450 houses for first-time homebuyers and underwritten emergency home repairs, full house rehabilitation, or accessibility modification for nearly 800 income eligible homeowners in neighborhoods throughout Norman .

The CDBG Program has also underwritten acquisition of neighborhood parks and the installation of pedestrian-scale, period lighting in the city's oldest neighborhoods. Over the years CDBG has also enabled a number of special projects such as the purchase of the Sooner Theatre, the construction of the Little Axe Community Center and Fire Station, and a major addition to the Norman Senior Citizens Center that have created community-wide benefit. In all, over \$9.4 million in CDBG funds have been spent on infrastructure and other projects in Norman.

One of the most valuable though intangible benefits of the CDBG program is that participant neighborhoods have an advantage on planning infrastructure compared to other areas of Norman. Because CDBG neighborhoods' needs are revisited annually, these areas are on the City's radar screen. In many cases, CDBG funds are used as a tool to leverage other Capital projects, thereby allowing the City to rectify larger problems and spread the benefit to a wider community. The complete rebuilding of Jones Avenue in in 1995 is a prime example of this kind of leverage.

In 2010, the City of Norman received \$929,444 in CDBG projects, down from a high of \$1,053,000 in 2003. Current economic conditions are forcing all areas of government to do more with less. While decreased funding levels is certainly a challenge, it can also be an opportunity. In the coming years our task is to help Norman's neighborhoods begin to develop social capital in ways that sustain them for the long run.

## **History of CDBG, continued**

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CDBG areas can become attractive, high-functioning neighborhoods at not only a physical but also at a social level. Now we have an opportunity to begin developing strategies that combines CDBG projects such as community identification and placemaking with more effective social organization, and with projects that foster a sense of ownership in the neighborhoods. Time and again in cities across the country, it has been proven that creating a strong sense of ownership is the most effective tool in the successful revitalization of a neighborhood.



St Joseph's Catholic Church is a land use anchor along Porter Avenue serves as a neighborhood gateway.

## Neighborhood Planning: How Did We Get Here?

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Since 1974, First Courthouse residents have met twice a year to discuss neighborhood issues and prioritize CDBG projects. Over nearly four decades, CDBG projects have addressed infrastructure deficiencies such as inadequate water and sewer lines, deteriorated streets, insufficient lighting and poor drainage. Many of these projects were identified in the area's first long-range plan, the 1990 *First Courthouse Neighborhood Plan*. Though brief in scope, the 1990 *Plan* has been referenced often and used to guide neighborhood projects for the past 20 years.

### Update of 1990 Plan

The 1990 *Plan* focused on resolving on-going conflicts between commercial and residential land uses along Porter Avenue and the Downtown edge. An escalation of land-use conflicts prompted the Norman City Council's 2007 decision to study the Porter Avenue Corridor at an intensive level, with the hope of developing solutions to land-use conflicts and also identifying opportunities for improved traffic circulation, economic development and aesthetics along the corridor. Beginning in October 2007, residents participating in the annual fall meeting identified neighborhood Assets, Liabilities and Opportunities as a starting point for an update of the 1990 *Plan*.

### Where Do Things Stand Now?

Though four years have passed since First Courthouse's original brainstorming sessions, the neighborhood's core assets and liabilities remain largely unchanged. Opportunities, however, continue to evolve in the changing economic, political and funding climate. The primary reason for the delayed completion of the neighborhood plan was the City's decision to undertake the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan*. Implementation of the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan* is likely to have a positive effect on the First Courthouse Neighborhood.

Another changing dynamic that may ultimately have a positive impact on First Courthouse Neighborhood is Norman Regional Hospital's (NRH) decision to build a new hospital campus west of I-35. The Regional Healthplex opened in 2009. This shift has begun to draw doctors and clinics away from Porter Avenue to new offices near the new hospital. At present, the NRH remains committed to keeping the Porter Campus open and continues to function as a general service, acute care hospital. The long-term effects of NRH's split to two campuses are still developing but these shifts may present significant opportunities for the neighborhood in the future.



Porter Avenue has a number of Art Deco style buildings that give the corridor a distinctive character.





Longfellow Middle School is a neighborhood asset as well a neighborhood landmark.

## Neighborhood Assets, Liabilities & Opportunities

As one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, First Courthouse has great bones. In addition to its distinctive architecture and a strong sense of place, the CDBG program has positively impacted neighborhood infrastructure over the past 37 years. The following is a transcription of lists of neighborhood Assets, Liabilities and Opportunities generated by participants during the Fall 2007 CDBG meeting.

### Assets

- Housing is affordable
- Neighborhood is quiet in some locations
- Close to Francis Cate Park
- Good lighting in some places
- Presence of two schools
- Walking distance to shopping
- Walking distance to medical district
- Neighborhood on Findlay and Griffin bus lines
- Adjacent to Cleveland County Fairgrounds
- Area has a good neighborhood feeling
- Diverse types of housing
- Lots of trees
- Original looking—doesn't look like everywhere else
- Predominantly zoned R-1 with pockets of multi-family

### Liabilities

- Bar ditches provide inadequate drainage
- A number of houses are in poor condition
- Lack of maintenance on rental properties
- Drainage problems on Rich and Cockrel
- Lack of sidewalks throughout neighborhood
- Poor lighting in some places: 800-block E. Hayes, Carter Avenue
- Higher crime rate around Jefferson Elementary
- Cate Park is too dark; attracts loiterers
- Cate Park is not fully developed and in poor condition
- Commercial encroachment into residential areas
- Speeding and cut-through traffic along all east/west streets, especially Carter
- Poor condition of streets and sidewalks
- Too many barking dogs
- No way to effectively address problem tenants
- Lack of response from Animal Control



From a neighborhood perspective, Norman Region Hospital is both an asset and a liability.

## Neighborhood Planning Process, continued

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As a public space, Frances Cate Park is an asset and has "great bones" and but needs overall revitalization.

### Opportunities

- Build a good network of sidewalks
- Create street that accommodate all modes of travel
- Become a Proactive Code Enforcement area
- Pave Rich Street
- Add curbs and guttering to all streets
- Create a safe, well-lighted, well-maintained neighborhood
- Improve conditions at Cate Park



Portions of 1960s-era neighborhood development were built with sidewalks; some areas

## First Courthouse Neighborhood Issues

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Lists of neighborhood-generated Assets, Liabilities and Opportunities were grouped into broad issue categories. Each category is summarized below, describing assets to be stewarded, liabilities to be corrected, and opportunities that could be developed into meaningful neighborhood improvement. These issue categories form the basis for the First Courthouse Neighborhood Plan Concept which is fully developed later in this document.

First Courthouse Neighborhood issue categories include:

- Physical and Civic Infrastructure
- Neighborhood Investment, Quality of Life & Appearance
- Traffic, Parking & Circulation

### Physical Infrastructure

Physical infrastructure refers to the large-scale network of public services or systems such as water lines, storm and sanitary sewer systems, roads, alleys and sidewalks in the neighborhood. Civic infrastructure refers to parks, schools, recreational trails or other public buildings or institutions. Churches, though private, are often included in the category of civic infrastructure. Examples of physical infrastructure in the First Courthouse Neighborhood include the following:

*Drainage Structures*— The neighborhood has five types of stormwater drainage systems in place, from full curb & gutter with underground drainage pipes to a passive drainage system of bar ditches or swales. Opportunities to install major drainage infrastructure are very limited throughout the area so installing curb and gutter is fairly impractical in many locations. In addition, the area is very flat with clayey soils that drain poorly. Along some blocks, drainage swales have been filled in over the years which eliminates the possibility of even passive drainage unless the swales are reintroduced.

*Sidewalks*— Throughout much of the southern half of the neighborhood there are sidewalks; however some segments are missing or deteriorated and many corners do not yet have accessibility ramps. In the northern half of the neighborhood there are limited places to install sidewalks due to the relatively shallow placement of houses on lots, short driveways and the lack of on-street parking. The goals of parking cars in driveways and installing sidewalks are often in direct conflict.



Sidewalk segments along Hughbert Street across from Jefferson School have virtually disappeared under creeping sod.

## Summary of Neighborhood Issues, continued

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### Civic Infrastructure



Frances Cate Park is a 14-acre neighborhood asset and a good example of civic infrastructure.



Jefferson Elementary School includes a whole block bounded by Gray, Cockrel, Hughbert and Stewart Streets.

*Water Lines and Sanitary Sewer.* The entire sanitary sewer system in the neighborhood has been replaced. All areas are served by lines between 8-12 inches. [verify]

If physical infrastructure makes it possible to inhabit a place, civic infrastructure is what makes it enjoyable to live there. Examples of civic infrastructure in First Courthouse Neighborhood include:

*Frances Cate Park*—Located along Carter Avenue adjacent to the Griffin Memorial Hospital campus, Frances Cate Park provides neighborhood open space, though it is somewhat underutilized in its current condition. The park however has “good bones,” a central location, and presents a significant opportunity to become an area destination and a placemaking anchor in the First Courthouse Neighborhood. The 14-acre park includes open space, playing fields, a playground, picnic shelters, and off-street parking. It includes an unchannelized segment of Bishop Creek. Much of the park’s recreational space is passive. Though most Norman parks are intended for daylight use only, neighbors often complain that Frances Cate Park is poorly lit and that the darkness attracts loiterers. The equipment on the playground is dated and the area offers little shade for users during the hot summer. Overall, the park is spacious and multi-faceted with ample green space. It is easily accessible from all directions, including a sidewalk along the east side of Carter Avenue between Robinson and Gray Street. With strategic public investment, Cate Park has potential to become a very popular neighborhood and community destination.

*Jefferson Elementary School.* Located at 250 N Cockrel, Jefferson opened its doors in 1916 and has been a neighborhood anchor ever since. The school serves children from Pre-School to 5th Grade. Student enrollment in 2011 is just over 400. The sprawling red brick complex has had several additions since its original construction but retains a basic Institutional Gothic style of architecture. The school also includes a large playground that could be utilized on occasions as neighborhood play space during after school hours. If the school administration is amenable, Jefferson may be a suitable location to hold regular meetings of the neighborhood association.

## Summary of Neighborhood Issues, continued



Norman Regional Hospital Porter Campus remains a 248-bed, general service acute care hospital anchored on Porter Avenue.



The Southern OK Chinese Baptist Church at 625 E Frank has imposing Mid-Century modern design.



Grace Presbyterian is a small congregation located at 310 N Findlay Avenue has Art Deco-style and likely dates to the 1940s.

*Longfellow Middle School*—Located at 215 N. Ponca, the historic brick school opened its doors in 1925. It was originally a primary school and later as a high school. Today the school serves young people in grades 6-8 with a student body of just over 600 students. During 2011-2012 school year, the campus will be undergoing a major renovation that will include a new main entrance to the building, a front courtyard along the Ponca Avenue edge and a complete rehabilitation of the school auditorium. Particularly with the renovation of the auditorium, Longfellow will be well-suited for a variety of large-scale community gatherings and performances.

*Norman Regional Hospital Porter Campus.* As discussed elsewhere in this document, Norman's original hospital on Porter Avenue has undergone substantial changes prompted by the opening of the Regional Healthplex in west Norman. The 28-acre Porter Campus remains a general service acute care hospital, offering 248 beds and including departments of General Surgery, ER, ICU and Progressive Care. Moving other departments to the west campus has allowed a \$2.6 million renovation of the 1950s era North Tower to occur. The North Tower facility will reopen in April 2011. The renovation has brought all facilities in this large section of the hospital into compliance with current HVAC, life safety and accessibility standards and has brought patient care rooms to a level on par with the new Regional Healthplex campus on the west side. The hospital has no plans to expand existing land holdings beyond the current campus footprint.

*Churches* —Early 20th-Century church buildings can add very desirable visual texture and activity to established neighborhoods. However this can be a delicate balance between competing land uses as churches are often driven by needs for expanded parking and building facilities. Just like expanding commercial land uses, churches usually seek to expand in the path of least resistance: into neighborhoods. For the most part, churches in First Courthouse Neighborhood have peacefully co-existed with residential land uses. Active congregations in the neighborhood include:

- St. Joseph's Catholic Church, 211 N. Porter
- Southern Oklahoma Chinese Baptist Church, 625 E Frank
- Grace Presbyterian OPE, 310 N. Findlay

## Summary of Neighborhood Issues, continued

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### Neighborhood Investment, Quality of Life & Appearances

A healthy neighborhood with a high quality of life requires emotional as well as financial investment from its inhabitants. Indicators of neighborhood health are both tangible and intangible. Tangible indicators of investment are reflected in the overall neighborhood condition such as houses and yards kept neat and in good repair, well-tended trees, people out in their yards, and the presence of well-utilized public spaces. Intangible indicators of neighborhood health include property values and sales price trends, how frequently houses come on the market and how quickly they sell, and what percentage of the houses are owner or renter-occupied.

*Long-term Residents.* First Courthouse has many long-term residents who are deeply connected to neighborhood. This is good for neighborhood health and well-being. However, parts of the neighborhood are experiencing conversions of owner-occupied housing to rental housing, particularly along commercial and institutional edges. This trend can indicate decreasing levels of personal investment; falling market values, and often leads to decreased levels of property maintenance.

*Code Enforcement.* Trends toward poor property maintenance often indicate declining emotional and financial investment in the neighborhood. Lack of consistent code enforcement sends a subtle message to all that nobody cares about the neighborhood even if this is untrue. Neighbors often complain about poorly maintained rental property and feel helpless to create any kind of lasting change to this negative trend.

*Proximity to Community Destinations.* First Courthouse Neighborhood is adjacent to Norman Regional Hospital and close to doctors' offices, churches, schools, the Porter Avenue commercial corridor, and Downtown Norman. Residents can easily walk or bike to reach many basic services and daily needs, including some of Norman's most popular restaurants. However this convenience comes at a price: increased traffic, noise, encroachment from expanding businesses, and demolition of houses for parking lots.

*Effects of Commercial and Institutional Encroachment.* Without intervention, commercial and institutional edges can creep into adjacent residential areas with a generally negative impact on physical and social conditions of residential blocks. Unchecked expansion of non-residential uses (or the threat thereof) is a destabilizing force in neighborhoods that adversely affects



Prior to the PCZOD, commercial uses adjacent to houses were required to be buffered only by a wood stockade fence.

## Summary of Neighborhood Issues, continued



Norman Regional Hospital built a masonry wall north of Frank Street buffering a large parking lot and signaling the end of hospital expansion into the neighborhood.

property values and causes property owners to lose confidence in the security of their investments. Struggles between expanding commercial uses and neighbors seeking to “protect their turf” have resulted in a kind of chronic gridlock.

In the 1990s and early 2000s Norman Regional Hospital grew substantially, expanding southward into the neighborhood. The hospital’s momentum also spurred the construction and expansion of private medical offices as well. In the early 2000s, a large medical office building was erected on the east side of Findlay Avenue, which had long been the boundary line between Porter institutional and residential uses to the east. At the south end of the hospital campus, NRH agreed to build a six-foot masonry wall along the alley north of Frank Street signal their intention to limit hospital expansion to that point.

With the City’s 2010 adoption of the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan* and the Porter Corridor Zoning Overlay District (PCZOD), First Courthouse Neighborhood now has a powerful tool creating a limit line for commercial expansion and which requires a 4-6-foot masonry buffer wall and a 10-foot landscape buffer between expanding businesses and adjacent residential uses. This protection should help restore residential property owners’ confidence and boost the incentive to reinvest in houses near commercial edges since the community has reached a shared understanding that commercial encroachment will have a stopping point.

## Traffic, Parking and Circulation



The bus stop at Findlay and Oliver has a bench and solar-powered shelter.

For the most part, First Courthouse’s circulatory system is an effective grid, although there are some locations where traffic and circulation conflicts persist. Office and commercial parking lot expansions have encroached into residential blocks as far east as Findlay Avenue.

*Parking Lots.* Until the adoption of the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan*, residentially zoned blocks adjacent to Porter Avenue had little recourse when adjacent office or commercial uses sought to expand their parking lots.

*Bus Stops.* The neighborhood includes two stops on the Alameda East/N 21 CART bus route. There is a bus stop with no shelter at the SE corner of Findlay and Gray and a bus stop with a formal shelter at the NE corner of Findlay and Oliver. For more information about CART bus routes, go to the CART website: <http://cart.ou.edu/routes.html>

## Summary of Neighborhood Issues, continued

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The triangle formed by the confluence of Daws Street with Acres and Porter presents an opportunity at several levels.

*Acres Intersection.* The Acres Street/Porter Avenue intersection is complex. Porter Avenue is a busy arterial road carrying up to 18,000 cars/day. As one of Norman's few streets with an at-grade railroad crossing, Acres has become a busy east-west through-street for automotive traffic. Acres crosses Porter Avenue at "the elbow," i.e. a bend in the road, so drivers' sight lines are shorter there, allowing them less response time to see pedestrians, cyclists or turning movements of other cars.

The Acres intersection also includes a short segment of Daws Street which terminates at this point, essentially making this a five-way intersection. The triangle formed by Daws, Porter and Acres is rather a no-man's land both visually and functionally. If the segment were vacated it could become an opportunity for the commercial land use to the south to acquire a little more land and expand their building or parking. At the very least, with landscaping and possibly signage, the triangle presents an urban design opportunity for the Porter Corridor.

Acres Street is also a major pedestrian route to Longfellow Middle School, located one block east of Porter Avenue. There is a pedestrian-activated, in-ground crosswalk on the north side of the Acres-Porter intersection. Both automobile users complain that the lighted crosswalk is confusing to drivers, who often do not stop for pedestrians in the crosswalk. Pedestrians complain that the system confusing is because they cannot see whether lights are flashing except at night.

## Opportunities

Like most mature American neighborhoods, First Courthouse has assets to be protected and liabilities to be addressed. But with its central Norman location, its wide variety of early 20th Century housing stock, its proximity to public facilities, good & services, recreational and entertainment facilities, First Courthouse has substantial opportunities on its horizon that many neighborhoods could only dream of. Later in this plan document, we outline strategic goals and objectives to help First Courthouse residents and stakeholders begin to take advantage of this potential for revitalization.

## Neighborhood Context: A Sense of Place

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Early 20-th Century bungalows are a prevalent architectural style in First Courthouse Neighborhood.

### What is Sense of Place?

The term "sense of place" describes a personal response to the built and natural environment that individuals experience in daily life. It refers to feelings, emotions and attachments that people have for a particular location.

In the First Courthouse Neighborhood, sense of place is defined by the setting of mature trees lining the streets, the street pattern itself, the placement of houses along the blocks, the presence of several churches. These elements work together with the close-knit rhythm of houses to create a sense of place that is unique to this neighborhood.

First Courthouse doesn't *look* or *feel* quite like any other neighborhood in Norman. This sense of place is a valuable asset and should be nurtured and stewarded through sensitive planning for future generations.

As in many mature neighborhoods in American cities, First Courthouse possesses an inherently strong *sense of place* with many physical features that define its form and identity and make the neighborhood a desirable place to live. These features include:

*Historic Building Character.* First Courthouse Neighborhood retains many examples of early 20th Century architecture, including architectural styles such as Folk, National-style and Craftsman/Bungalow.

*Post WWII Building Styles.* North of Hughbert Street, newer subdivisions include single-family houses with attached garages. This segment of the neighborhood demonstrates changing 20th Century residential building trends.

*Street Pattern.* In general, First Courthouse has a grid pattern of streets, lined with sidewalks in the southern sections of the neighborhood. Many blocks in this neighborhood have between seven and ten houses on the largest face of a block.

*Trees.* Many First Courthouse streets are lined with mature trees. The leafy green canopy provides a comforting sense of enclosure as well as environmental benefits such as cooler temperatures, increased oxygen levels, decreased levels of carbon dioxide, and a sense of well-being.

*Physical Environment and Scale.* First Courthouse has a human scale. This is defined by a well-established traditional rhythm of houses, tree-lined sidewalks, streets, and alleyways. With its many different styles and sizes of houses, many residents observe that the neighborhood "just feels livable."

*Porter Corridor and Main Street.* First Courthouse residents are within easy walking and biking distance of goods, services, and institutions that support their daily activities along the Porter Avenue Corridor and Main Street/Downtown.

*Civic Infrastructure.* First Courthouse includes an elementary school and a middle school, three churches, a 28-acre public hospital campus and a park. The neighborhood also includes CART bus routes and bus stops along Findlay Avenue.

*Public Space.* Sidewalks are considered to be public space as are parks. Frances Cate Park with its open space, playground, basketball courts and soccer fields provides community gathering and play space for First Courthouse neighborhood and for the community as a whole.

## Neighborhood Context, continued

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The stone Folk-style structure at Gray and Ponca was reportedly built with salvaged stone blocks from the original Cleveland County Courthouse.



First Courthouse is a comfortable residential neighborhood defined by single-family houses, trees, sidewalks and houses with front porches.

*Boundaries and Geography.* First Courthouse is the largest of Norman's five CDBG neighborhoods and one of the oldest. It includes approximately 175 acres over 35 blocks. The neighborhood is bounded on the north by Robinson; on the south by the north side of Main Street; on the west by Porter Avenue and on the east by Carter Avenue. The bulk of the neighborhood's residential structures were built between 1900 and 1975.

*Neighborhood Character.* The neighborhood's dominant land use is single-family residential, with scattered garage apartments, duplexes, and higher density apartments. It is edged by the Porter Avenue commercial corridors on the west and on the south by one block of Downtown Main Street.

*Porter Corridor.* Porter Avenue, a commercial and institutional corridor through central Norman, forms the western edge of the neighborhood. The Porter Avenue Corridor was the subject of a recent planning study and presents many opportunities for the neighborhood. The *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan* is discussed in more detail later in this document.

*Original Plats.* The neighborhood includes eight plats: Carpenter, Doctor's Park #1 and #2, Elliott, Griffin Heights, Hardie Field, High School, and Tiffin.

*Architecture.* The neighborhood retains a few examples of Folk-style and National-style dating to the 1910s, as well as many examples of Craftsman/Bungalow style from the 1920-1930s. The northern half of the neighborhood includes Minimal Traditional, Ranch, Neo-Colonial styles, and interpretations of Folk-style structures constructed after World War II.

*Landmarks.* The heart of First Courthouse neighborhood includes a number of landmark structures, notable for their age, function, design or location. All of these landmarks contribute significantly to the neighborhood's character and sense of place:

- Jefferson Elementary School, 215 N. Cockrel
- Longfellow Middle School, 215 N. Ponca
- St. Joseph's Catholic Church, 211 N. Porter
- Southern Oklahoma Chinese Baptist Church, 625 E Frank
- Grace Presbyterian Church OPE, 310 N. Findlay
- Main Street & Carter Avenue Roundabout

## Neighborhood Context, continued

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This house at the northeast corner of Hughbert and Cockrel is particularly nice example of high National Style architecture.

*Historic District Status.* No part of First Courthouse Neighborhood is currently designated as a local historic district. Based on surveys of historic architecture done in 1989, it was determined that most of the oldest section of the area has been significantly altered over time and has lost much of its original architectural integrity. There are however a number of individual structures in the neighborhood, particularly south of Hughbert Street, which retain a great deal of historic integrity. The neighborhood has no structures listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

*Census Data and Land Use.* According to US Census data and Cleveland County Tax Assessor records, First Courthouse Neighborhood is 58% owner-occupied and 42% renter-occupied units. Most recent Census data shows a total of 590 housing units. Of the 590 units, 92% are single family units and 6% multi-family structures (2-4 unit). In terms of household income, the neighborhood is described as 63% low-to-moderate income with a total population of nearly 700 inhabitants.

Neighborhood land use is characterized by three major types:

- *Single-Family Houses*
- *Civic Infrastructure.*
- *Adjacent Commercial Corridors.* The northwestern section of the First Courthouse neighborhood includes the north half of the Porter Avenue Commercial and the Medical Corridor.

*Zoning.* Despite its single-family character, the neighborhood was zoned R-3 Multi-Family in 1954. This has allowed the construction of parking lots by Special Use Permit along Porter Avenue. It has also enabled increases in residential density that have eroded neighborhood character, particularly at the edges adjacent to commercial land uses. For the future, First Courthouse residents may desire to pursue zoning that is more consistent with existing land use and which does not leave them vulnerable to incompatible development.



This restored I-House style farmhouse has anchored the northeast corner of Main and Ponca for 110 years.

*Overall Neighborhood Condition.* First Courthouse residents are frustrated with poor property maintenance and feeling that they have no effective means of addressing problem tenants. Though early 20th Century neighborhoods are rich often on charm and provide an affordable niche for many homeowners, the downside of these neighborhoods is that without other forces that reinforce real estate values and personal investment, the American appetite for ever-bigger houses has diminished their desirability. This trend has been accelerated along Porter Avenue and the Downtown edge by demand for business parking and institutional expansion. Rental-occupancy rates are higher

## Neighborhood Context, continued



This small historic commercial center at the NW corner of Main and Findlay.

along these edges property conditions are often noticeably poorer. Patterns of neighborhood erosion began along these commercial edges decades ago and will continue unabated without some intervention. While the Downtown commercial corridor has steadily improved over the past decade, physical and aesthetic conditions along Porter Avenue are poor, with economic conditions and market rates that are poor-to-fair.

*Trees*. Many people comment that tree-lined streets are one of the neighborhood's best features. Trees cool the environment, infuse oxygen into the air and provide a sense of leafy enclosure. The neighborhood's tree canopy is aging and many trees have been lost in recent storms. Rights-of-way along the streets need to be replanted to ensure a tree canopy remains in place for many years.

*Sidewalks*. The sidewalk network is in basically good condition but needs spot repairs, missing segments installed, and of accessibility ramps installing in some locations. Sidewalks are present in the original southern subdivisions of First Courthouse but much of the northern half of the neighborhood was built without sidewalks. Houses in this area have shallow front setbacks, making it difficult to retrofit sidewalks without sacrificing parking on private property. If blocks also have a bar ditch and culvert drainage system this further constrains sidewalk construction on those blocks, making it nearly impossible to achieve.

*Conversions to Rental Housing*. The trend of converting owner-occupied housing to rental housing has been particularly acute along commercial edges in First Courthouse. Several blocks adjacent to Porter Avenue have become nearly 100% rental. With the adoption of the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan* and the Zoning Overlay District, this trend could see a reversal in the future.

*Affordable Housing*. First Courthouse and surrounding Porter Corridor neighborhoods include some of Norman's remaining affordable housing. Relatively small early 20th Century houses make attractive starter homes for young families, graduate students, senior citizens or anyone looking to downsize. This population diversity is an asset that residents value highly. Revitalization along Porter Avenue may push adjacent residential property values upward, but it is important to the neighborhood that affordability be preserved in any way possible. The average size house in First Courthouse is around 1,000 square feet, which is modest size by local real estate standards. In general, houses are moderately-priced compared to elsewhere in Norman.



In some cases sidewalks are tree-lined. In this block of Hughbert, the wide right-of-way also accommodates utility poles.

## Neighborhood Context, continued

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Prior to adoption of the Porter Corridor Zoning Overlay, only a board fence was required to separate commercial from adjacent residential land uses.

*Land Use Conflicts.* Conflicts between residential and expanding commercial land uses have existed for decades at the southern and western edges of First Courthouse Neighborhood. Much of this was ignited along Porter and Frank Street by Norman Regional Hospital’s expansion in the 1980-1990s. Back in 1984, Norman’s *Central Core Plan* recommended a neighborhood revitalization project establishing a clear line between commercial/institutional and residential uses. Over the past five years, conflicts along Porter Avenue have become more frequent as successful commercial operations have sought to expand into adjacent neighborhoods. Along with land use conflicts, traffic congestion continues to build along Porter Avenue, making current circulation patterns along the corridor unsustainable in the long term.

*Neighborhood Edges.* Along commercial edges of Porter Avenue and Downtown, current transitions between land uses can be abrupt. *The Porter Avenue Corridor Plan* creates a commercial limit line and seeks to create graceful transitions between land uses with required buffer walls and landscape strips between commercial and residential uses. Institutional uses also need buffers between themselves and residential neighbors.

Land uses delineated in the *1990 Plan* and in three, *Five-Year Consolidated CDBG Plans*, (2000, 2005, and 2010 ), were approved by the First Courthouse Neighborhood, the Norman City Council and by US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

*Cultural and Economic Diversity.* This neighborhood’s physical diversity of land uses and building types means it is a visually interesting environment with lots of “texture.” This varied environment spawns a high degree of cultural and economic diversity among inhabitants. First Courthouse neighbors value their diversity and the sense of neighborhood vitality that comes from people being out in their yards, children walking to school, and neighbors interacting with each other on the street.



Mid- 20th Century houses in First Courthouse neighborhood are modest in size and relatively affordable by local real es-

## Neighborhood Context, continued

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### Physical Infrastructure

*Stormwater Drainage.* Poor drainage is a persistent problem in First Courthouse Neighborhood for three reasons: the area is very flat, it has poor soil percolation, i.e. clayey soils that do not allow water to filter into the groundwater; and there are a limited number of underground drainage structures available. The City sought to solve flooding issues as far back as 1936 by dispatching Works Progress Administration (WPA) crews to build stone-lined channels for Imhoff and Bishop Creeks in Central Norman. This successfully sped water downstream but as more impervious surface has been created upstream over the past 70 years, the problem of stormwater runoff continues to grow.

First Courthouse's north-south collector streets have curb and guttering. The east-west cross streets mostly have inlet/underground or bar ditch drainage systems. The neighborhood has five types of drainage systems found throughout the area:

- Concrete curb-and-gutter, with drainage inlets and u/g drainage
- Concrete curb-and-gutter
- Drainage inlets with underground drainage
- Bar ditches with culverts
- Bar ditches that have been filled in over the years, leaving a passive system of detention/evaporation

For many years, First Courthouse Neighborhood has declared a goal of eliminating bar ditches and installing curb and gutter along all neighborhood streets in their neighborhood plans. From a practical standpoint, it is not physically possible to achieve this goal in many locations. Integrated drainage structures—prohibitively expensive in terms of engineering and construction costs—are not prevalent in the neighborhood so in many cases there is simply no place to drain water *to*.

While underground drainage is the fastest method of removing stormwater, it is by far the most expensive and the least environmentally sustainable method to drain stormwater from city streets. The City of Norman's developing understanding of stormwater management best practices means that engineers are now seeking stormwater removal methods that are both effective and environmentally friendly. Engineers seek to help citizens understand how bar ditch maintenance, for example, will allow that type of drainage system to operate to its highest capacity. In addition, the City is exploring new techniques of sustainable stormwater management such as rain gardens, a retention technique that beautifies while it also performs a vital function.

## Neighborhood Context, continued

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Some of First Courthouse's alleys are paved; many are gravel but most all are in good-to-serviceable condition.

*Alleys.* First Courthouse neighborhood has a system of alleyways primarily south of Hughbert Street. Some are paved; many are gravel, but all are in serviceable condition. For many years, the neighborhood has allocated CDBG funding to pave these alleys with asphalt, one block at a time. Recently however, residents living along paved alleys have realized there are downsides to this practice: paved alleys generate stormwater runoff and often have a higher elevation than adjacent properties, so they also contribute to flooding in backyards. Paved alleys attract more traffic which moves faster on a paved surface than it does on a gravel surface.

Over 37 years of the program, many CDBG dollars have been spent paving alleyways, only to have them deteriorate quickly due to heavy truck traffic. City streets are designed to carry heavy loads; neighborhood alleyways were never intended to. As CDBG budgets continue shrinking with no end in sight, the question must be asked: is alley paving the best use of limited funding? What kinds of projects could provide the greatest benefit to the largest number of First Courthouse Neighborhood residents?

*Alley Trash Collection.* In addition to the runoff and speeding issues related to alleys, the practice of alley garbage collection is highly inefficient. Norman's Sanitation Division uses the new style of side-collection automated trucks, which allow one driver to handle an entire route. But this also means that trash trucks must make four passes to collect trash from a single block (two sides of the streets, two sides of the alley). Alley collection is also hard on the trucks. For large trash trucks many of the city's alleys are nearly impassable due to vegetation, projecting gas meters, low-hanging utility wires, and the location of alley buildings. Finally, repairing alleyways to the City standard of 6" thick concrete costs a minimum of \$70,000 a block. Asphalt paving is sometimes cheaper but does not hold up well under heavy truck use. A loaded trash truck can weigh up to 44,000 pounds. These heavy trucks damage alleyways that were never intended to carry such loads. These constraining factors in the city's alleys add to the cost of garbage collection for all Norman's citizens.



This asphalt alley east of Porter Avenue has been often patched. Board fence separates the alley from adjacent residential back yards.

*Sanitary Sewer.* Over the past 37 years through the CDBG program, First Courthouse neighborhood has been completely retrofitted with new 8-12-inch sanitary sewer lines. As the CDBG program replaced sewer mains over the past 37 years, sewer connections to individual houses were also replaced throughout the neighborhood.

## Neighborhood Context, continued

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Historic lamp posts give the neighborhood warm character.

*Water.* The entire neighborhood is serviced by 6-12-inch water lines, many of which were installed by the CDBG program over the past 37 years. As the CDBG program replaced water mains, water connections to individual houses were also replaced throughout the neighborhood. A few undersized lines (under 4 inches) remain at Crawford & Acres, Crawford & Himes, and along the 330-block of East Frank. These undersized lines should be replaced as funding allows.

*Lighting.* Roadway lighting throughout the neighborhood meets the City standard of one roadway light at the end of each block in most locations. However residents often observe that the City standard is still too dark for their comfort. In some places, this is because the tree canopy is beneath the 30-foot roadway light, so it blocks the light from reaching the street or sidewalk.



Modest sized, single-family houses are the dominant land use pattern in First Courthouse neighborhood.



Though functional, this pedestrian bridge in Frances Cate Park is not very accessible and is not particularly attractive.

**Four Reasons to Revitalize Frances Cate Park**

1. Park enhancement is a highly visible and effective tool in neighborhood placemaking.
2. This project would give the City the opportunity to solve long-standing stream quality issues along Bishop Creek.
3. Park revitalization will create very attractive and usable public open space for the neighborhood and the larger community.
4. Investment in the public realm conveys a strong commitment to revitalization of a Porter Corridor area neighborhood .



The Cate Park Playground equipment is dated and the area lacks shade.

## Revitalization of Frances Cate Park

Shrinking CDBG budgets at the federal level have prompted a re-thinking of how to approach future neighborhood projects in Norman’s five CDBG areas. First Courthouse residents have expressed interest in focusing resources on the revitalization of Frances Cate Park, a 14-acre park on the eastern edge of the neighborhood.

Frances Cate Park is a large open space for First Courthouse Neighborhood, though it is fairly underutilized in its current condition. The park has “good bones,” a central location in Norman, and presents a significant opportunity for the neighborhood.

The 14-acre park includes open space, informal play fields, a playground, picnic shelters, and off-street parking. It also includes a segment of Bishop Creek that is in poor-to-fair condition. The park playground equipment is dated and the area offers little shade or seating for users. Much of the park’s recreational space is passive—the fields are a particular favorite for pick-up soccer games. Though most Norman parks are intended for daylight use only, neighbors often complain that Frances Cate Park is poorly lit and that the darkness attracts loiterers.

Overall, Frances Cate Park is a spacious, green and multi-faceted environment. The park is easily accessible from all directions, including a sidewalk along the east side of Carter Avenue between Robinson and Gray Street. With a well-thought-out revitalization plan, Cate Park has potential to become a very popular neighborhood and community destination.

A Revitalization Plan for Frances Cate Park revitalization could include a number of program elements:

- Improved landscaping particularly along park edges
- Extended sidewalk/walking path
- Tree planting to for strategic shade
- Bishop Creek Stream restoration
- Playground improvement and expansion
- New pedestrian bridges
- Basketball court area enhancement
- Attractive park furniture such as benches, lighting, trash receptacles, bike racks, drinking fountains

**INSERT HISTORICAL INFRASTRUCTURE  
PROJECT DATA HERE**

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**INSERT INFRASTRUCTURE MAPS HERE**

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## Porter Avenue Corridor Plan

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### Why Undertake the Porter Avenue Corridor Plan?

In its current form, Porter Avenue's impact on First Courthouse neighborhood is largely negative, though residents appreciate the convenience of being close to commercial and institutional destinations. Commercial uses along Porter need room to grow and the only place they can expand is into the adjacent neighborhoods. This has occurred steadily over recent decades, causing the removal of houses for parking and igniting a trend of disinvestment in the adjacent residential blocks. East of Porter Avenue, many blocks that were once owner-occupied have become almost entirely rental occupied. Porter's environmental aesthetics are poor which detracts from the quality of life in adjacent neighborhoods. Right now, Porter Avenue is largely an opportunity unrealized. Many nearby residents and business owners would like to change this.

### What is the Purpose of the Porter Avenue Corridor Plan?

The purpose of the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan-Staff Update* is to guide future improvement of the Porter Avenue Corridor, while focusing on the existing community and the rich history of the area. The plan explores opportunities for the creation of a pedestrian environment along Porter Avenue, the establishment of an enhanced streetscape that attracts new commercial activity and leverages investment in commercial property, and the preservation of adjacent residential neighborhoods.

### What Do We Hope to Achieve in the Porter Corridor?

The *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan-Staff Update* describes five broad categories of long-term improvement along the corridor:

#### *Mobility and Public Safety*

Establish Porter Avenue as a safe, accommodating connection with Downtown Norman, other established commercial districts, and adjacent neighborhoods. Manage traffic along Porter in a way that maintains the corridor as a safe transportation network for all users, allowing access for pedestrians, buses, and bicycles as well as cars.

#### *Aesthetics*

Create a destination environment reminiscent of Porter's transportation "roots" that is complemented by attractive green



The Porter Avenue Corridor Plan was created to establish a revitalization vision for this important 1.2-mile corridor through central Norman.

## Porter Corridor Plan, continued

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### *Aesthetics, continued*

space, a spectacular streetscape, and high visual interest which creates an attractive environment for private investment on adjacent land throughout the corridor.

### *Neighborhoods*

Blend existing neighborhood fabric with opportunities for new residential development that will establish Porter neighborhoods as walkable and well-maintained with connectivity and easy access to amenities and essential goods and services.

### *Economic Development*

Make Porter Avenue a significant revenue-generating corridor for Norman, encouraging development efforts that create a balance of uses. Create development that blends seamlessly with adjacent neighborhoods, parks, trails, and institutions.

### *Land Use*

Balance Porter Avenue's active commercial and mixed use areas with the needs and character of the surrounding established neighborhoods to maximize economic growth and protect the interests of all Porter Avenue stakeholders.

## **What's Next for the Porter Corridor?**

As a part of the *Porter Avenue Corridor Plan – Staff Update*, Norman City Council also adopted the Porter Corridor Zoning Overlay District (PCZOD) that establishes a limit line for commercial land uses along Porter Avenue. Businesses which expand to this line must build an opaque masonry wall and ten-foot deep landscape buffer at the property line that will separate residential properties from commercial activities. Masonry walls are effective in creating a physical and psychological edge that clearly conveys the point where one land uses stops and another starts. This mutually respected edge is critical for peaceful coexistence between commercial and residential land uses.

*The Porter Avenue Corridor Plan* establishes a long-range vision for creating both physical and economic change along this central Norman corridor. Implementing these revitalization goals for Porter Avenue will require time and investment from both the public and private sectors. Without the investment to improve Porter's streetscape environment and to create a permanent protective buffer between commercial and adjacent residential land uses, the Porter Avenue that exists today is likely the best it will ever be.



# DRAFT CONCEPT

## First Courthouse Neighborhood Plan Concept: Strengthen What We Have

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Working with resident-generated goals, data from a physical survey of the neighborhood, and other current City plans, the City of Norman planning team has developed this Neighborhood Plan Concept as a framework to implement specific improvements in the First Courthouse Neighborhood.

The Plan Concept, perhaps best summarized as “Strengthen What We Have,” identifies six long-term goals for the First Courthouse Neighborhood. On the following pages, each goal is articulated and accompanied by specific objectives. If implemented, these measures will be very helpful in preserving and protecting First Courthouse’s many assets and will also effectively reverse negative trends in the neighborhood.

### **GOAL 1: Strengthen Neighborhood Edges**

*Mark clear boundaries that separate Porter Avenue commercial land uses from adjacent residential areas in First Courthouse. A mutually respected edge is critical for peaceful coexistence between commercial and residential land uses.*

### **GOAL 2: Protect History, Character and Sense of Place**

*Protect the neighborhood’s physical environment that includes blocks of houses and other buildings, the pattern of sidewalks, streets and trees, and proximity to neighborhood goods and services.*

### **GOAL 3: Strengthen Zoning Protections**

*Support zoning changes that reflect 2025 Plan Land Use Plan recommendations, preserve the single-family residential character of First Courthouse Neighborhood, and promote the peaceful co-existence of adjacent land uses.*

### **GOAL 4: Improve Traffic and Circulation at Key Locations**

*Calm traffic and improve safety along key streets and at busy intersections. Improve pedestrian access throughout the neighborhood but particularly across Porter Avenue.*

### **GOAL 5: Upgrade Neighborhood Infrastructure**

*Make meaningful infrastructure improvements that enhance the neighborhood’s quality of life.*

### **GOAL 6: Enhance Appearance and Quality of Life**

*Encourage participation in programs that beautify the neighborhood, enhance individual property values, and build a sense of connection between neighbors.*



Simple brick columns with minimal landscaping can create a very effective neighborhood entryway.

## GOAL 1: Strengthen Neighborhood Edges

*Mark clear boundaries that separate Porter Avenue commercial land uses from adjacent residential areas in First Courthouse. A mutually respected edge is critical for peaceful coexistence between commercial and residential land uses. These goals are closely correlated with the Porter Avenue Corridor Plan goal to protect neighborhoods.*

### 1. Develop neighborhood gateways that formalize entry into First Courthouse at the following locations:

- Findlay Avenue at Oliver
- Carter Avenue north of roundabout
- Carter Avenue south of Robinson
- Gray Street west of roundabout
- East Frank at PCZOD line

### 2. Strengthen neighborhood identity through meaningful placemaking activities.

- Develop a high quality neighborhood identification graphic package that includes a logo and signage
- Plant appropriate species of trees in rights-of-way to create or sustain the urban tree canopy
- Expand historic lighting scheme to other parts of the neighborhood
- Revitalize Frances Cate Park to become a meaningful open space
- Develop interpretive signage for Frances Cate Park, First Courthouse Neighborhood, and historic landmarks in the neighborhood.

### 3. Monitor proposals that expand commercial zoning along Porter Avenue to ensure that developers fulfill obligations for residential buffering per the Porter Corridor Zoning Overlay District (PCZOD).



Neighborhood gateways are both symbolic and functional points of entry.

## What is Placemaking?

According to authors and urban planners Al Zelinka and Susan Jackson Harden in a book entitled *Placemaking on a Budget*, "placemaking refers to the process of adding value and meaning to the public realm through community-based revitalization projects rooted in local values, history, culture and natural environment."

Urbanist Phillip Langdon writes "placemaking has become a necessary activity as a response to the 20th Century's creation of an impermanent, standardized built environment at odds with community pride and loyalty. Yet the stubborn fact remains: human beings need places that matter to us, places in our cities, towns and neighborhoods that we can point to and inhabit with pride."

## Examples of Placemaking

Successful placemaking takes many different forms from the installation of public art to activities on private property that help create a distinctive neighborhood identity.

- Public art in parks or other gathering places in the public realm
- Attractive lighting designs
- Creation of neighborhood gateways
- Decorative sidewalk treatments
- Tree planting in public ROW
- Decorative bus stops or shelters
- Corridor landscaping
- Neighborhood identification signage on posts or light poles
- Interpretive historical signage for parks, schools, buildings, or natural features
- Park revitalization projects, e.g., stream bank restoration, seating areas, tree planting, lighting, decorative fencing, and interpretive signage, engaging play equipment.

## GOAL 2: Protect Character and Sense of Place

*Protect the neighborhood's physical environment that includes blocks of houses, sidewalk patterns, tree-lined streets, and the proximity of neighborhood goods, services and institutions.*

- 1. Undertake neighborhood placemaking activities (see sidebar) that strengthen the neighborhood's edges, strengthen identity, and create public spaces that attract people.**
- 2. Revitalize Frances Cate Park to make it an attractive, inviting "living room" for the entire neighborhood.**
- 3. Work through the City's Neighborwoods Program to distribute and plant appropriate tree species in rights-of-way to sustain or create the urban tree canopy.**
  - Create a neighborhood tree-tenders support program to help nurture newly-planted trees and teach property owners how to take care of them.
  - Develop a Friends of Frances Cate Park program to invest neighbors in the park's condition and to maintain the health of new plantings in the park.
- 4. Work with the City of Norman to create home improvement grants for property owners to be used for painting and exterior repair.**
  - Use improvement programs to preserve and enhance neighborhood character and historic building design
- 5. Use attractive sidewalk treatments to link the neighborhood with the Porter Avenue Corridor and Downtown.**

### **What is the Porter Corridor Zoning Overlay District?**

During the Porter Avenue Corridor planning process, the Zoning Overlay District was identified as a regulatory tool that could be effective in achieving a desired balance between commercial and residential land uses in the corridor.

City Council adopted the Porter Corridor Zoning Overlay District (PCZOD) thereby establishing a commercial limit line. The PCZOD requires businesses that expand to this line build an opaque masonry wall and 10-foot landscaped buffer at the property line that will provide a separation between residential and commercial activities.

### **What Are the Requirements of the Porter Corridor Zoning Overlay District (PCZOD)?**

- Establishes a Commercial Limit Line
- Requires that commercial land uses expanding to the limit line must have 10-foot wide landscape buffer and 4-foot high masonry wall, increasing to 6-foot high adjacent to neighbor's backyard
- Requires parking lots to have downcast lighting on poles no higher than 20 feet



The PCZOD will buffer transitions between commercial and residential land uses to better protect houses from negative impacts of commercial activity.

## **GOAL 3: Strengthen Zoning Protections**

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*Support zoning changes that reflect Norman 2025 Land Use Plan recommendations and which preserve the residential character of First Courthouse Neighborhood by promoting the peaceful co-existence of neighboring land uses.*

- 1. Support downzoning parts of the neighborhood to R-1 if property owners in the area desire to do so.**
  - City staff can make a presentation to educate residents about the process required to downzone property.
- 2. Support applications for commercial or institutional rezoning only when complies with the Commercial Limit line of the Porter Avenue Corridor Plan, including off-street parking lots.**



To safely cross busy streets, pedestrians must rely on drivers stopping at crosswalks.

## GOAL 4. Improve Traffic and Circulation at Key Locations

*Reduce speeds and improve safety along busy road segments and intersections. Improve pedestrian access throughout the neighborhood but particularly along and across Porter Avenue.*

### 1. Address speeding and cut-through traffic problems along Carter and Findlay Avenues.

- Increase police monitoring in these known speeding areas.
- Request the City Traffic Engineer undertake a study of areas with persistent speeding problems to determine if traffic calming measures are required.

### 2. Make pedestrian improvements at the Acres and Porter intersection a community priority.

- Work with Norman Public School officials to get a crossing guard stationed at this busy intersection.
- Improve sidewalk connections along Acres Street linking Longfellow Middle School, Porter Avenue, Updegraff Park, Legacy Trail and Andrews Park.
- Request the City of Norman to fund a detailed traffic analysis of the Porter Avenue Corridor to determine the best options for future traffic flow along Porter Avenue, including the best options for safe crossing at the intersection of Acres & Porter.

### 3. Use CDBG funding to improve walkability in the neighborhood.

- Use the sidewalk survey from this document to establish priority sidewalk projects.
- Use School Sidewalk funds from Public Works Department to address sidewalk deficiencies near Jefferson Elementary School and along routes to Longfellow Elementary on the east side of Porter Avenue.

### 4. Improve sidewalks along and across Porter Avenue.

- Use the *Porter Corridor Public Streetscape Design* to begin improving sidewalks that serve the neighborhood on the east side of Porter.
- Consider using CDBG funds to leverage private sector improvements to commercial facades along Porter Avenue.
- Make landscaping improvements along Porter Avenue that connect with gateways into the neighborhood.

#### What is Walkability?

A walkable neighborhood is a place where people live within walking distance to most places they want to visit, whether it is school, work, grocery stores, parks, churches, banks, retail shops, or drug stores, and where people choose to walk to access these goods and services instead of drive their cars.

A walkable neighborhood has sidewalks or clear pedestrian zones linking major destinations in and around the area. A walkable community is made up of a collection of walkable neighborhoods.

In a walkable neighborhood, people choose walking or biking before they choose to take a 2,000-pound vehicle to buy a one-pound loaf of bread!

#### Walkability In First Courthouse Neighborhood:

- Wherever feasible, install sidewalks where there are missing segments throughout the neighborhood.
- Using *Porter Corridor Public Streetscape Design*, install new or replace existing sidewalks along Porter Avenue.
- Using *Porter Corridor Public Streetscape Design*, install landscaping improvements along Porter Avenue that make sidewalk environment more attractive to walkers.
- Install accessibility ramps throughout the neighborhood wherever they are missing or inadequate.



Bishop Creek's condition of flowing through Cate Park is poor and an eyesore. Stream restoration would improve park aesthetics and help mitigate downstream flooding.

## GOAL 5. Upgrade Physical and Civic Infrastructure

*Make meaningful infrastructure improvements to enhance neighborhood quality of life.*

### 1. Improve drainage throughout the neighborhood by installing curbs and gutters where appropriate or by other means where curbs and gutters are not feasible.

- Use physical survey data from this report to identify specific locations where improved drainage is needed. Determine if there are drainage structures nearby that can be utilized to address the problem.
- Use data from this survey to verify the type and location of existing drainage structures in the neighborhood.
- In problem areas where there are no drainage structures in place, identify if there are other realistic techniques that could improve the drainage situation.

### 2. Revitalize Frances Cate Park to become inviting and meaningful open space for the neighborhood, with opportunities for both active and passive recreation.

### 3. Improve sidewalk connections throughout First Courthouse linking the neighborhood with Jefferson Elementary School, Longfellow Middle School, the Porter Avenue Corridor and Downtown Norman.

### 4. Establish a plan to install pedestrian-scale lighting plan along key sidewalks in the neighborhood.

### 5. Eliminate alley trash collection as a means to reduce sanitation truck damage to alleys and improve sanitation department operating efficiency.

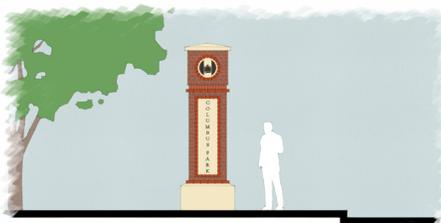
### 6. Initiate sidewalk and landscaping improvements along the east side of Porter Avenue which conform to the *Porter Avenue Corridor Design for Public Streetscape*.

### 7. Install neighborhood gateway monuments at major points of entry to the neighborhood:

- Findlay Avenue at Oliver
- Carter Avenue north of roundabout
- Carter Avenue south of Robinson
- Gray Street west of roundabout
- East Frank at PCZOD line



Sidewalks linking neighborhood destinations are vital to getting people around the neighborhood without having to use a car.



Gateways not only mark neighborhood boundaries, they also help enhance a neighborhood's sense of place.



Well-maintained houses convey to all that people care about the health and safety of the neighborhood.

## **GOAL 6. Enhance Appearance and Quality of Life**

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*Foster participation in programs that beautify the neighborhood, enhance individual property values, and build a sense of connection between neighbors. Effective implementation of this goal will require a public-private partnership with some tasks undertaken by the City, some undertaken by the City and the neighborhood together, and some initiated by neighborhood residents themselves.*

### **1. Work to reactivate First Courthouse’s Neighborhood Association as an important symbol of social investment and revitalization.**

#### **City-Led Tasks**

- Establish neighborhood leadership training programs (e.g. Neighborhood Alliance’s Neighborhood Leaders for Today) that sustain the organization and successfully implement ongoing revitalization activities.

#### **Neighborhood - City Partnerships**

- Hold a Neighborhood Association Relaunch event with a facilitated discussion about neighbor expectations of the group’s purpose and goals.
- Educate property owners about neighborhood expectations for property maintenance and to work with Code Enforcement to ensure that proactive enforcement practices are consistent.
- Make meaningful recommendations for future CDBG projects in the neighborhood.
- Participate in discussions about future redevelopment efforts as part of Porter Corridor revitalization, especially as an advocate for preservation of neighborhood affordability and design character.
- Establish an electronic neighborhood newsletter that comes out at least twice a year.
- Create an email database to facilitate more effective communication among neighbors.



## GOAL 6, continued

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### Neighborhood-Led Tasks

- Use the association to monitor issues that affect the neighborhood, to be an effective communication tool, to educate residents about property maintenance expectations, and to provide a mechanism that builds connection between neighbors.
- Organize regular neighborhood social gatherings that allow neighbors to get acquainted and share information (e.g. potluck suppers, ice cream socials, neighborhood picnics, etc.)
- Use Neighborhood Association and email to distribute information about various City of Norman programs that can benefit property owners.
- Initiate a needs assessment of neighborhood residents who may require various kinds of assistance to maintain and improve their property.

### 2. **Maintain First Courthouse’s historic tree canopy by planting new trees and replacing diseased or dying trees.**

#### Neighborhood-City Partnerships

- Work as a Neighborhood Association with the City’s Neighborwoods Program to distribute and plant appropriate tree species in rights-of-way.
- Hold a Tree Planting Day as part of the Neighborwoods Program, the City’s urban reforestation program for planting street trees in rights-of-way.
- Working through the Neighborhood Association, create a neighborhood tree-tenders support program to help nurture newly-planted trees and to teach property owners how to take care of them.

### 3. **Develop a Friends of Frances Cate Park program to invest neighbors in the park’s condition and to maintain the health of new plantings in the park.**

#### Neighborhood-City Partnership

- Hold an information-gathering meeting with other “Friends Of Park” groups in the City followed by an organizational meeting to outline mission, strategies and next steps.
- Plan an annual neighborhood event (e.g. ice cream social) to be held at Cate Park or Jefferson or Longfellow Schools.



Neighborhood leadership training sessions are an effective way to bolster participation and overall effectiveness of neighborhood associations.

## GOAL 6, continued

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4. Work with the administration of Jefferson Elementary School and neighborhood churches to build stronger relationships that help support the neighborhood.

### Neighborhood-City Partnership

- Consider making Jefferson Elementary the regular meeting place for the Neighborhood Association.
- Encourage residents to use the school playground and fields as neighborhood open space and play space.
- Work with the school and other resources to develop continuing education opportunities (hobbies, academics, etc.) that can be held at school facilities.

### Neighborhood-Led Task

- Approach the churches about working with the Neighborhood Association to undertake home improvement projects for elderly or handicapped neighborhood residents.



Neighborhood identification signs are effective placemaking tools and help reinforce a sense of place.

## Conclusions: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Over the past 37 years, City staff working with CDBG neighborhood residents have implemented numerous infrastructure improvements in five neighborhoods. Much of the critical infrastructure—replacement of water and sewer lines, reconstruction of collector streets—has been addressed. Though not inexpensive to undertake and often essential to basic health and sanitation, in many ways, these projects could be considered low-hanging fruit. The more difficult task is creating a climate of sustained personal investment in the health and well-being of the neighborhood.

After 37 years in the CDBG business, both the needs and the tasks required to fulfill those needs have shifted. Now more than ever CDBG neighborhoods need to be better organized and better connected, with meaningful projects on their plates to keep residents engaged, invested and moving forward. Now here in Norman we are seeking to use CDBG funding as a catalyst to pull it all together and create a sustainable system that works both now and later.

Solving urban problems in Norman's CDBG neighborhoods is not as simple as it looks. In older neighborhoods, problems are inextricably woven—solve one, create another. For example, residents may complain of localized drainage deficiencies. The problem is not installing curb and gutter; we know how to do that. It is overcoming the lack of storm sewers to drain the water *to*. Sidewalks are another thorny issue. Sidewalks are not part of standard infrastructure in many mid-20th Century subdivisions. Moreover, the shallow setback of houses in newer subdivisions often means that installing sidewalks inadvertently eliminates parking for many residents who would block sidewalks—a violation of City Code—by parking in their own driveways.

True enhancement of the quality of life in CDBG neighborhoods requires a coordinated strategy rather than a collection of projects. Effective strategies can only be created by the people who live there, asking themselves questions such as “how do we want our neighborhood to look in ten years?” And “what steps can we take to make it happen?” Our task for the next ten years is to help Norman's CDBG areas combine activities such as community identification and placemaking, effective social organization projects, and community beautification projects in ways that foster a strong sense of ownership in the neighborhoods.

**INSERT PLAN  
RECOMMENDATIONS MAP  
HERE**

**First Courthouse Short-Term Implementation Strategy**

**DRAFT**

<u>PROJECT</u>	<u>COST ESTIMATE</u>	<u>FUNDING SOURCES</u>
1. Install gateway monuments at entry points into the neighborhood: Frank Street Oliver at Findlay Avenue Carter south of Robinson	\$10,000-\$30,000	CDBG (funding in hand)
2. Proceed with Cate Park Revitalization project, beginning with .....	\$150,000-\$200,000	CDBG
3. Help convene and facilitate Friends-of-Cate Park organizational meeting	\$200	Staff and volunteer time
4. Hold Neighborhood Association Relaunch event, including election of neighborhood officers and gathering email addresses for database	\$200	Staff and volunteer time
5. Facilitate development of electronic First Courthouse Neighborhood Newsletter	No cost	Staff and volunteer time
6. Create neighborhood email database	No cost	Staff and volunteer time
7. Develop neighborhood identification graphics package to include neighborhood logo, signage, and letterhead	\$2,500 +/-	CDBG
8. Install neighborhood identification signage throughout neighborhood	\$10,000 +/-	CDBG
9. Work with City Staff to develop home improvement grant program for property maintenance of owner occupied, low/mod income housing; fund program	\$40,000	CDBG
10. Install missing sidewalk segments and accessibility ramps where missing	\$20,000	Capital Fund Neighborhood Improvement, CDBG,
11. Eliminate alley trash collection wherever feasible, working with neighbors to find alternatives	No cost	
12. Install a block of Porter Avenue Streetscape	\$170,000	Capital Fund Neighborhood Improvement, CDBG

# APPENDIX