

# MICHIGAN STREET WAYFINDING SIGNS CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

FINAL REPORT

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Funded by  
Grand Rapids SmartZone

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study recommends a conceptual approach to the design and location of wayfinding signs on Michigan Street between College Avenue (east) and Division Avenue (west). The study was undertaken as a follow up to the *Michigan Hill Urban Design and Streetscape Concepts* (August 2007) to establish a framework for coordinating wayfinding approaches in order to (1) integrate with the adopted Downtown Wayfinding system and (2) assist Spectrum Health and the Michigan Street Development, located in the western end of the study area, in refining their plans for a new exterior signage system. The wayfinding study addresses two of the three sub-areas that make up the larger Michigan Hill study area: the densely developed concentration of life science institutions (Life Science Core) located east of Division Avenue and the under-developed East End, located west of College Avenue, where significant future redevelopment is anticipated.

The purpose of the study is to develop a consensus on an approach to wayfinding signs that will:

- Assist corridor visitors/patients in locating major destinations and associated parking.
- Complement efforts to enhance the quality of the pedestrian environment on Michigan Street.
- Create a unified system that adds to the corridor's identity as a life science/high tech core.

## 2 PARTICIPANTS AND PROCESS

For continuity, the same 16-member Committee that reached consensus on corridor urban design and streetscape concepts was invited to participate in the wayfinding study. Committee members represented area institutions, neighborhood and business organizations, major property owners, the Michigan Department of Transportation and the Interurban Transit Partnership. The Committee was chaired by Deputy City Manager Eric DeLong. City staff from Planning, the Downtown Development Authority, Parking Services and Traffic Safety also participated in Committee meetings. JJR, LLC coordinated the consultant work for the Committee. Corbin Design provided conceptual sign design services. The sign consultant for Spectrum Health and the Michigan Street Development, fd2s, also participated in all Committee meetings. The study was funded by the SmartZone LDFA.

The Committee members met five times over a four-month period to discuss issues and priorities; evaluate alternative design approaches; identify locations for a hierarchy of sign types and reach consensus on a conceptual approach to wayfinding signs.

# **RECOMMENDED CONCEPTS**

## **1 WAYFINDING PRINCIPLES**

Wayfinding provides direction for people in motion. The principles of wayfinding design include:

- Design for the first time user.
- Design to simplify the visual environment (legibility, coherence).
- Give only the information needed at a given decision point.
- Integrate design elements.
- Contribute to a sense of place.
- Create synergy between destinations.
- Respond to diverse stakeholders.
- Design for flexibility and to minimize maintenance costs.
- Design for adaptability to other media.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Urban Design and Streetscape Recommendations**

Wayfinding signs are one of many elements that make up the streetscape – its visual quality and its amenity for people on foot. The design and location of wayfinding signs must be carefully coordinated with other streetscape elements including paving treatments, landscaping and street furniture (e.g., street lights, benches). Wayfinding signs complement, but do not “drive” streetscape design decisions.

Several key recommendations for streetscape improvements on Michigan Street serve as context for wayfinding recommendations.

- The design theme on Michigan Street should have a “modern” or “cutting edge” expression consistent with the role of Grand Rapids’ Life Science Core as a district where technologically advanced research is accomplished and applied.
- Today and in the future, zoning will require a minimum 14-foot dimension between the back of curb and building face. As a result, the recommended sidewalk cross section includes a minimum 7-foot clear traveled way for pedestrian movement; a 5.5-foot amenity zone (to incorporate curbed planters with street trees or special paving, street lights and furniture) and a 2-foot curb zone that is clear of vertical elements. Signs located within the public right-of-way (ROW) should be located within the amenity zone and should not be allowed to obstruct the sidewalk’s clear traveled way.
- Just as the Michigan Street streetscape treatment could be extended to adjacent blocks on north-south streets, so can these adjacent blocks serve as an important locations for corridor wayfinding signs. This will enhance district identity and add value to the corridor.
- Corridor gateways (at Division and College Avenues) and nodes (at Coit and Lafayette Avenues) should incorporate special identity elements. These might include banners mounted on light poles, among other design strategies.

### **2.2 Downtown Wayfinding System**

In 2004, the Downtown Development Authority adopted an overall district plan and administrative guidelines for a wayfinding sign system for the downtown area. Four downtown districts were

established (CenterCity, WestSide, HeartSide and HillSide). On Michigan Street, Division Avenue marks the boundary between the CenterCity and HillSide districts.

The Downtown Wayfinding system includes four sign types:

- District Welcome Signs, located at entrances to the downtown and introducing the names and symbols of the four districts .
- District Directional Signs, directing visitors from a downtown entrance to one of the four downtown districts and including the name of one or two major district destinations.
- Local Directional Signs, located within or at the edge of a district and including the names of district destinations
- Pedestrian Kiosks, including a map and building directory

These signs are located within the public ROW. They are pole-mounted and have a traditional design character.



Figure1- Downtown Wayfinding Signs

Downtown Wayfinding system signs are located on and adjacent to Michigan Street between Division and College Avenues as follows.

- A Welcome Sign is located on the north side of Michigan Street at Prospect.
- District Directional Signs are located at the I-196/College Avenue exit ramps.
- Local Directional Signs are located on both sides of Michigan Street at Bostwick.

In coordinating the relationship of the new Michigan Street wayfinding signs and the existing Downtown Wayfinding system the Committee recommends that:

- The Michigan Street area be identified as a sub-district within the Downtown Wayfinding system’s HillSide district. This will include placing a message identifying the sub-district name on District Directional signs.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As discussed below, the majority of Committee members supported naming this sub-district “Medical Mile.”

- The design of Michigan Street wayfinding signs be a “contemporary” translation of the more traditional Downtown Wayfinding system vocabulary. For example, the Michigan Street vehicular guide sign (comparable to the Downtown Wayfinding system’s Local Directional Sign) should use the same basic height, profile and pole mount system as the Downtown Wayfinding system.
- On Michigan Street between Division Avenue and the Grand River, Downtown Wayfinding system signs will be used. On Michigan Street between Division and College Avenues, the new Michigan Street wayfinding system signs will be used. In this area, Downtown Wayfinding system signs will be replaced with Medical Mile signs. In addition, Medical Mile signs may be used adjacent to the corridor on intersecting north-south streets.

### 2.3 Spectrum Health / Michigan Street Development Exterior Signs

Spectrum Health and the Michigan Street Development have adopted an exterior signage approach developed by sign consultants, fd2s. The primary objective of this approach is to guide patients/visitors to the correct “campus” entry point by using large, numbered entry markers. A series of eight entry markers is currently planned between Division and Claremont Avenues; number 1 is to be located closest to Division Avenue at the entrance to the Michigan Street Development with numbers increasing to the east. Number 8 is to be located at the parking entrance to the Musculoskeletal Center east of Barclay Avenue. The proposed entry markers will be two-sided ground signs that are 12 feet tall and 6 feet wide and internally illuminated<sup>2</sup>. A large number panel is located at the top of the sign, with message panels identifying emergency, parking ramp and major building destinations located below it.

Spectrum Health feels that such large signs are needed to ensure visibility on a densely developed, high traffic corridor. Signs need to be large enough to be seen from a distance in a crowded urban environment, with the number of the campus entry (and related parking destination) raised above car height. Internal illumination is needed for night time visibility. Their consultants believe that a 4” capital letter height is the minimum required for readability and that all messages should use a uniform capital letter height. In their view, the need to use full building names in a consistent, readable type size drives the need for a 6-foot wide sign.

In discussing the Spectrum Health/Michigan Street Development entry marker signs, the Committee agreed that:

- The Spectrum Health/Michigan Street Development sign design approach is consistent with the “modern” or “cutting edge” image desired on the Michigan Street corridor.
- An overlay signage district will be needed to permit the proposed sign design. In order to treat all property owners on the corridor equally, the use of numbered entry markers should be permitted by others (on Michigan Street east to College Avenue). Threshold criteria for permitting the use of these numbered entry markers will need to be established. These might include, for example: a minimum development



Figure 2 - Original Entry Market Concept

<sup>2</sup> A detailed study of Spectrum Health/Michigan Street Development entry marker locations is currently underway. In some instances, sufficient space may not be available to locate ground signs outside of the ROW. Where this is the case, entry markers may be designed as building-mounted projecting signs, building-mounted wall signs (non-projecting) or as ground signs.

size (total square feet); annual number of visitors and/or availability of a minimum number of visitor/public parking spaces. In addition, an overlay signage district plan will need to reference very detailed criteria to ensure a consistent quality in sign design, fabrication and installation. The Committee recognized that interest in the expanded use of entry markers might be limited as the signs have an institutional character that could imply an affiliation with Spectrum Health.

- A 6-foot wide sign could not be located within the public ROW in the 5.5-foot wide streetscape amenity zone to be established on Michigan Street. (Encroachment into the 7-foot sidewalk zone or the 2-foot curb zone should not be permitted.) As a result, signs of this size must be located on private property. A narrower version of the numbered entry marker (maximum width of 5 feet) might be allowed within the streetscape amenity zone in certain circumstances and after review and approval by the Planning Director.
- In addition to the numbered entry markers, the overlay signage district for Michigan Street could permit a building/facility identification sign that is smaller than the entry marker, but designed in the same style (including an internally illuminated destination name/logo panel at the top and internally illuminated building names below). This “new” sign type (See Private Elements, Figure 4) could help to strengthen the corridor brand by extending the use of the design vocabulary used on the numbered entry markers to other parts of the district. As noted above, the overlay district language would need to reference very detailed criteria to ensure a consistent quality in sign design, fabrication and installation.

## **2.4 Branding**

While the streetscape and wayfinding sign concepts proposed for the Michigan Street corridor between Division and College Avenues will help to establish a “brand” for the area, many other coordinated marketing initiatives will be required to develop and promote that brand. Committee members recognize the importance of this “branding” effort and the role that the choice of a district name, logo, colors and type face will play. These decisions will be critical as the recommended concepts presented here are developed further.

Consistent with the recommended streetscape concepts for Michigan Street, the new Medical Mile wayfinding system will address only that area between Division and College Avenues. The portion of the Michigan Street corridor located at the foot of the hill (west of Division) relates more closely to downtown’s CenterCity than it does to the balance of the corridor. As a result, Downtown Wayfinding system signs will continue to be used in this area.

The idea of expanding the use of new Medical Mile wayfinding signs to the area east of College to include the new MidTowne development was discussed by the Committee. This could be achieved by including this area in the proposed overlay signage district, allowing the use of the proposed numbered entry markers and facility identification signs which will be paid for privately. It is anticipated that the SmartZone LDFA will play a significant role in funding the fabrication and installation of Medical Mile “public” wayfinding signs (vehicular guide signs, street signs, banners, pedestrian kiosks). Because College Avenue marks the eastern edge of the SmartZone, LDFA funding for public wayfinding signs located further east on Michigan Street could present a problem.

### 3 DIRECTION

Relatively early in the study, the Committee evaluated a number of alternative wayfinding scenarios that would accommodate the signage needs of Spectrum Health; respond positively to the established Downtown Wayfinding system and help to “bridge” the design gap between the two. The Committee recommended the following approach to developing concepts and implementation tools:

- Allow Spectrum Health and the Michigan Street Development to use the entry marker system and conceptual design they have proposed (with possible modifications).
- Establish a public wayfinding system for Medical Mile that is more contemporary than, but related to, the Downtown Wayfinding system.
- Explore opportunities to “bridge” the two different design approaches to create a strong visual brand for the Michigan Street corridor (Division to College Avenues).
- Treat Medical Mile as a sub-district within the HillSide district that is part of the Downtown Wayfinding System.
- Allow for the replacement of the more traditional Downtown Wayfinding signs with more contemporary Medical Mile signs on Michigan Street (between Division and College) and allow for the use of new Medical Mile signs on north-south cross streets adjacent to Michigan Street.

### 4 RECOMMENDED CONCEPTS

The Medical Mile wayfinding system has both public and private components.

- Public components may be located in the right-of-way (ROW). The detailed design, fabrication, installation, maintenance and administration of the public elements of the wayfinding system will be managed by the existing Wayfinding Program Committee (established to manage the Downtown Wayfinding system) with the addition of a representative from the SmartZone LDFA. It is anticipated that design, fabrication, installation and maintenance will be funded by the SmartZone LDFA.
- Private components will be located on private property (outside of the ROW); criteria will be established to allow exceptions to this requirement in special circumstances. The detailed design of the private elements of the wayfinding system will be undertaken by the entities opting to use them. These detailed design plans, as well as fabrication and installation standards, will become part of an overlay wayfinding signage district plan for the corridor subject to the approval of the Planning Director. Fabrication, installation and maintenance will be funded by the entities using these private sign elements.

#### 4.1 Public Sign Elements

These elements of the wayfinding system concept, illustrated on the following pages, include:

- **Vehicular guide signs.** These signs are the same height and silhouette as the Local Directional signs in the Downtown Wayfinding system, and use the same destination message type face. However, they have a more contemporary pole and bracket design and use a reflective white vinyl background with black opaque vinyl copy. A Medical Mile sub-district logo could be added to the top of the sign. In addition, a “branded” type face could be used on the “Medical Mile” panel at the bottom of the sign. These signs are located at entrances to the Medical Mile district along Michigan Street and on several north-south streets. (See Sign Location Plan, Figure 5.)

- **Street signs.** These signs use a standard City street sign “blade” and are mounted on light poles at street intersections. A specially designed bracket matches the bracket design on the vehicular guide sign. A district logo could be added to the top or the bottom of the sign.
- **Banners.** Banner panels are mounted on light poles, again using a bracket design that matches those used on vehicular guide and street signs. Priority locations for banners are at the two district gateways (at Division and College Avenues) and the two district nodes (at Coit and Lafayette).
- **Pedestrian kiosks.** These signs include a map and destinations list on a 3-foot by 3-foot internally illuminated white panel supported on legs. The conceptual design of these signs is tied to the design of the proposed Spectrum Health/Michigan Street Development numbered entry markers (and the proposed building/facility identification signs), but the kiosks are much smaller in scale. Pedestrian kiosks will be located at major transit stops, at pedestrian exits from major visitor parking areas and at other high pedestrian traffic locations.

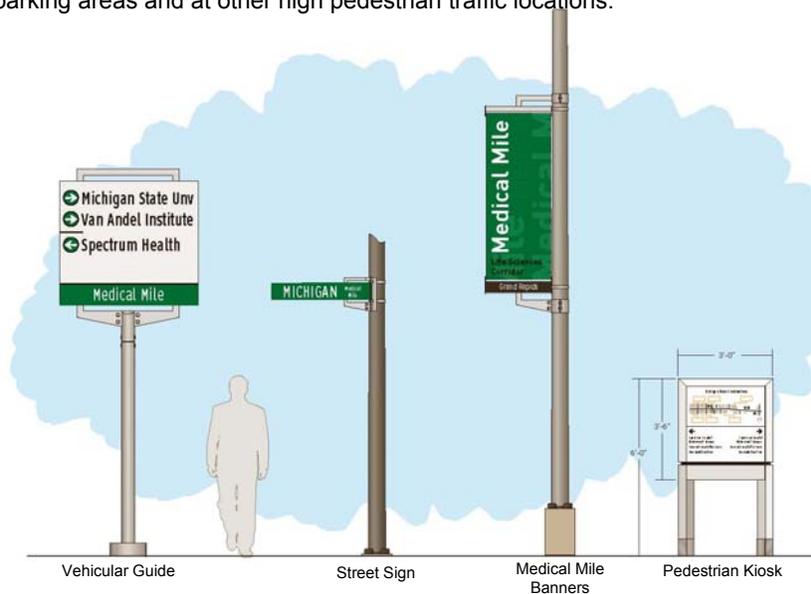


Figure 3 - Michigan Street Wayfinding Sign Concept: Public Elements

#### 4.2 Private Sign Elements

These elements of the recommended wayfinding system concept include:

- **Spectrum Health/Michigan Street Development numbered entry markers.** These internally illuminated signs represent Spectrum Health’s preferred option for size (12 feet tall and 6 feet wide). Eight locations have been proposed (see Conceptual Location Plan). These signs will be located outside of the public ROW and may be freestanding or used as projecting wall signs.
- **Alternative/Additional numbered entry markers.** These internally illuminated signs are narrower (5 feet wide) and have a more open design, with supporting legs, and space for fewer messages. They may represent an acceptable option for Spectrum Health/Michigan Street Development entry signs that are approved for location in the public ROW. (This approval may be granted by the Planning Director based on specified criteria and in exceptional situations.) They also represent a sign type that other entities may opt to use to mark entries to major corridor destinations; in this case, they will be located on private property.

- Facility identification.**<sup>3</sup> This ground sign concept provides an option for building/facility identification signs for Medical Mile corridor users that has a strong design relationship to the numbered entry markers and allows greater sign height<sup>4</sup> in exchange for strict consistency in design, fabrication and installation. The internally illuminated sign builds on the Spectrum Health design approach, but is smaller in size (9 feet tall and 4 feet wide) with a maximum of three message panels below a 4-foot by 4-foot logo panel. Its design with legs and an open base is also related to the pedestrian kiosk sign. It may be located outside of the public ROW only.

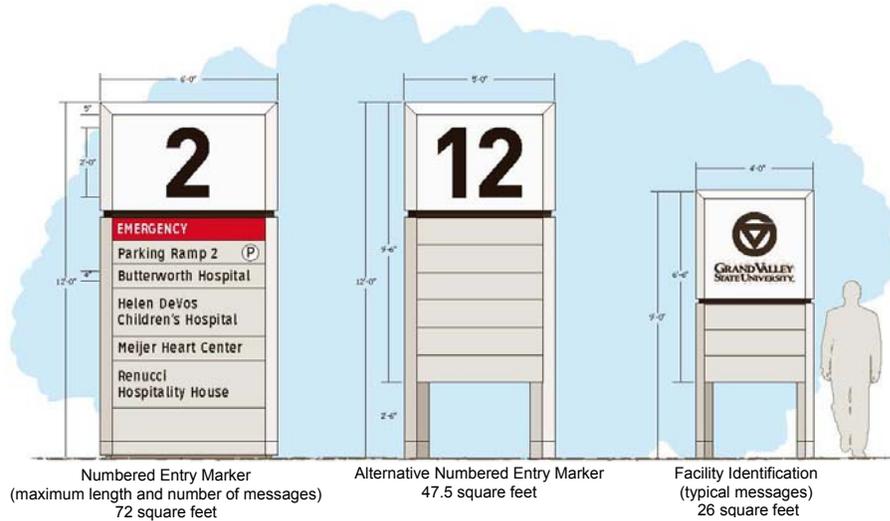


Figure 4 - Michigan Street Wayfinding Sign Concept: Private Elements

<sup>3</sup> The Committee supported the idea of offering a facility identification sign option tied to the design of the numbered entry markers in order to encourage greater consistency in sign design along the corridor. (The increase in allowable ground sign height provides an incentive for choosing this option.) Nevertheless, the Committee did not want to propose a mandatory uniform sign design approach for all corridor users.

<sup>4</sup> The maximum ground sign height currently permitted is 5 feet.

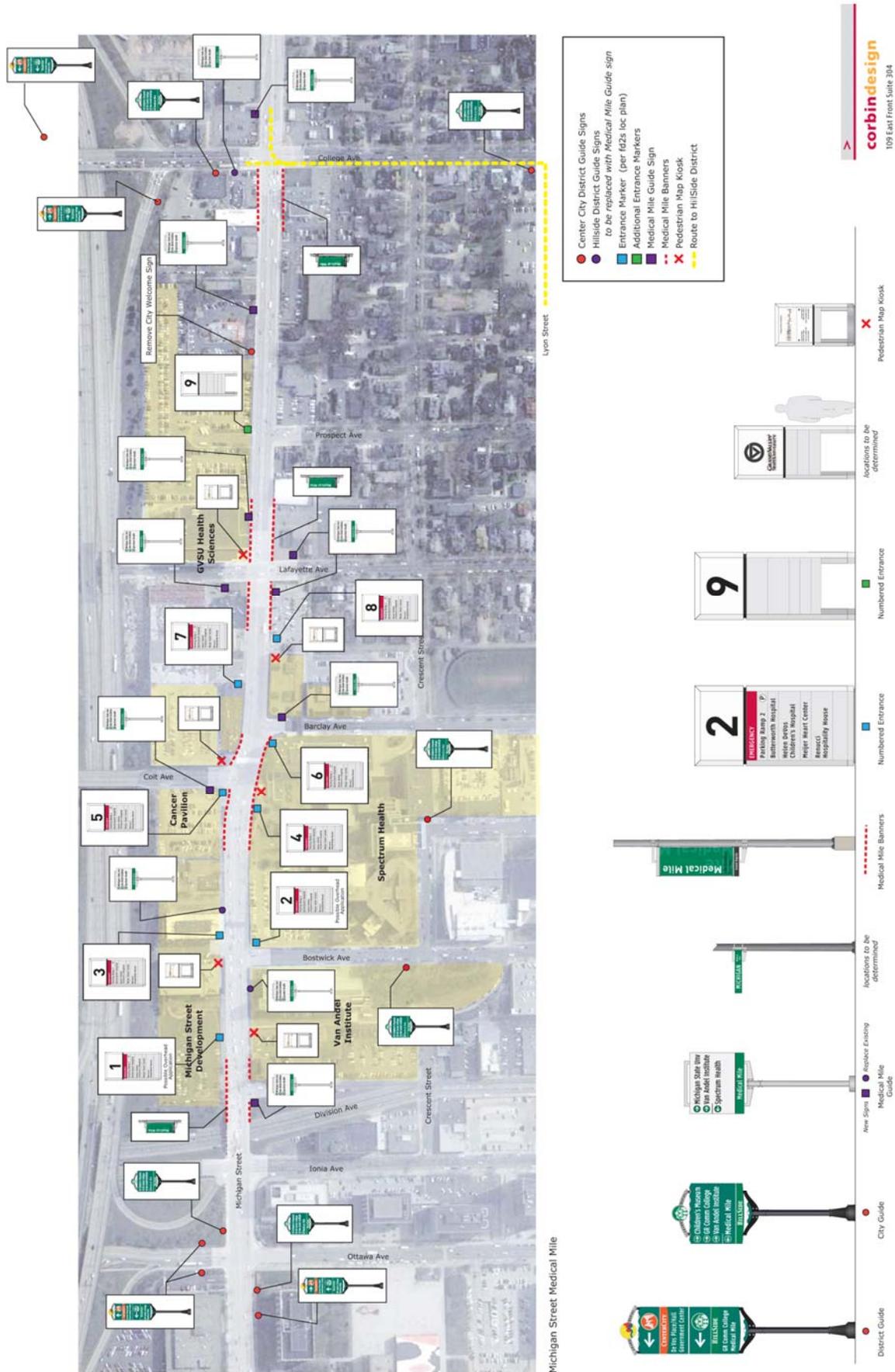


Figure 5 - Michigan Street Wayfinding Concept: Illustrative Sign Location Plan

# IMPLEMENTATION

## 1 ADMINISTRATION

Because both public and private components are included in the recommended wayfinding concepts for the Medical Mile corridor, two different administrative structures will be needed for implementation as illustrated below.

Administrative Issue	Public Signs	Private Signs
Who adopts the rules?	SmartZone LDFA City Commission	Planning Department City Commission
What is the vehicle?	District Plan Administrative and Maintenance Guidelines	Wayfinding Sign Overlay District District Plan/Standards Maintenance Plan
Who administers the rules?	Wayfinding Program Committee with SmartZone representation	Planning Director

## 2 REGULATION

It is anticipated that the regulations governing wayfinding signs will include two parts.

- An overlay signage district which establishes the broad parameters that apply to all wayfinding systems in the city.
- A more detailed location plan and set of design, fabrication and installation standards for each specific wayfinding system.

### 2.1 Overlay District

The contents of a wayfinding signage overlay district should address the following:

- **Overall purpose or intent.** This might include objectives pertaining to the quality and coherence of the streetscape; improving the clarity of directional information; minimizing visual clutter and encouraging collaborations among multiple users.
- **General eligibility requirements for establishing an overlay district.** These might include, for example, a densely developed, high traffic volume urban environment with multiple visitor attractions with medium to high annual visitation.
- **Eligibility requirements for listing of destinations** (e.g., annual visitation; number of public/visitor parking spaces provided).
- **General wayfinding sign requirements.** These might include the types of signs permitted (e.g., ground sign, pole sign, projecting sign, internally illuminated sign) and their function (e.g., identify a district gateway; provide directional cues to district destinations; identify district destinations and parking areas; orient pedestrians to district destinations). Overall maximum and minimum design standards (by sign type and/or function) should also be included (e.g., maximum sign height, width and area; maximum and minimum text sizes; minimum spacing between signs). Standards for the

placement of public (official) and private wayfinding signs, as well as the process for granting exceptions (if any) should also be addressed.

- **Application requirements and review/approval process.** Application requirements might include, for example, a district plan and standards developed through a collaborative process; the identification of a party responsible for sign fabrication, installation and maintenance and a list of the destinations to be identified, with supporting information.

## 2.2 District Plan and Standards

Consistent with the overall parameters of the overlay wayfinding signage district, the district plan and standards should provide more detailed design and construction/installation information. For example:

- **Overall location plan.** This plan should illustrate the location of each sign type proposed as well as the content (message schedule) for each sign location. Locations proposed within and outside of the public right-of-way should be specified.
- **Sign design plans.** These plans should provide dimensioned and colored illustrations of the face and side view each sign type with notes on materials, colors and details.
- **Detailed location plans.** These should include dimensioned plans of specific sign locations. Measurements showing distances to the curb, sidewalk clear traveled way and right-of-way edge (setback) should be noted.
- **Maintenance plan.** This plan should describe how the district will be administered and how signs will be maintained.
- **Phasing plan.** This should be included if it is anticipated that installation will be accomplished over an extended period.

## 3 COST AND FUNDING

Cost estimates have been developed for budgeting purposes for fabrication and installation for the elements of the recommended wayfinding system concepts.

### 3.1 Public Wayfinding Elements

Vehicular guide signs	
4 lines of text	\$7,500 each
6 lines of text	\$8,500 each
Street signs	\$1,500 each
Banner and brackets	
Single	\$3,000 each
Double	\$6,000 each
Pedestrian map kiosk	\$4,000 each

The total estimated concept-level costs for the public elements of the recommended wayfinding system are:

Vehicular guide signs (12)	\$ 96,000
Street signs (15)	\$ 22,500
Single banners (48)	\$144,000

Pedestrian map kiosks (6)	<u>\$ 24,000</u>
Sub-total	\$286,500
20% contingency	<u>\$ 57,300</u>
Total for budgeting	\$343,800

**3.2 Private Wayfinding Elements**

SpectrumHealth/MSD entry	\$18,000 each
Alternate entry	\$16,000 each
Business/facility identification	\$12,000 each

The SmartZone LDFA Priority Plan has budgeted approximately \$500,000 (FY 2009 – 2011) for design and installation of public elements of the wayfinding system. Individual owners will be responsible for the design, fabrication, installation and maintenance of private elements of the wayfinding system.

## NEXT STEPS

A draft overlay wayfinding district ordinance has been reviewed by Planning Commission and recommended for approval. City Commission has also reviewed the draft ordinance and has scheduled action for January 29, 2008. The Medical Mile district conceptual wayfinding recommendations will be presented to the SmartZone Board for review and approval on January 18, 2008.

Next steps in moving forward with the implementation of this report's recommendations include:

- SmartZone approval to initiate the preparation of more detailed plans for the public elements of the Medical Mile wayfinding system, including stakeholder review.
- The preparation of more detailed plans for the private elements of the Medical Mile wayfinding system in coordination with the Planning and Traffic Safety Departments.
- Approval of the Medical Mile wayfinding system District Plan and Standards by the Planning Director (private sign elements) and the Wayfinding Program Committee (public sign elements)..
- Application for sign permits for private sign elements.
- Bidding, fabrication and installation.

## **APPENDIX**

### **COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Eric DeLong, Chair, City of Grand Rapids  
Erin Babson, Grand Valley State University  
Kristi DeKracker, N.O.B.L.  
Jan Earl, Heritage Hill Association  
Jim Fetzer, Interurban Transit Partnership  
R. Jack Frick, Van Andel Institute  
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