

## Overview of Issues

### Regional Development Pressures

The City of Belle Plaine, located along the Minnesota River in the southwest corner of Scott County, is in one of the fastest growing counties in Minnesota, yet it has a strong relationship to the rural agricultural landscape surrounding the City. Like many rural communities at the urban/rural edge, it is experiencing many changes today and will experience even more in the future, and with change comes a new identity that may or may not reflect community values. Historically the city was built on the north side of US Highway 169, but with the upgrading of highway interchanges, future residential growth is expected to be primarily on the south side and future commercial growth is expected along both sides of the highway.

### Downtown

Downtown Belle Plaine, located at the intersection of Main Street and Meridian Street, is the center of community life and commercial business on the north side of US Highway 169. Historically, the town was designed to accommodate horse and buggy transportation and today the downtown roads reflect that heritage. The roads are approximately sixty-five feet wide with perpendicular parking and traffic speed is posted at thirty miles an hour.

The streets have a huge presence in the downtown, suggesting that it is heavily auto-oriented rather than pedestrian-oriented. The urban design elements also complement an auto-oriented environment with minimal pedestrian-oriented city way-finding signage, little vegetation and sporadic street lighting.

The buildings also play a significant role in shaping the public pedestrian environment. Some of the downtown building types are historic and all of the buildings maintain a narrow facade at the sidewalk and are two to three stories high. The buildings have a small footprint, with rectilinear and narrow geometry and all face the street grid with a uniform setback flush with the sidewalk. The buildings help to enhance the pedestrian environment by reducing the urban scale with elements such as human-scale windows and facade detail improvements, non-fixed awnings, and perpendicular signage oriented towards the sidewalk.

Connections to the Minnesota River, the regional trails, and the City Parks and Recreation system are developing. Consistent signage, bike paths and enhanced roadside landscaping could help pedestrians and bikers connect to the recreational systems and local natural amenities.

## US Highway 169 Corridor

The US Highway 169 Corridor, planned and maintained by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), connects the City of Belle Plaine with the Twin Cities to the north and Mankato to the south. US Highway 169 is located on a northeast to southwest angle in relation to the Belle Plaine city grid and is designated as a “High Priority Interregional Corridor” to the State by MnDOT. The Corridor Management Plan, published by MnDOT in 2002 addresses concerns about increased traffic, decreased highway speeds and safety concerns. MnDOT identifies US Highway 169 as essential to the mobility of those in Southwestern Minnesota. Highway performance and safety between the Twin Cities and Mankato is expected to significantly decrease over the next 20 years.

The plan addresses these concerns by controlling and limiting access to the highway in the corridor to achieve a balance between the needs and visions of individual communities and the safe and efficient movement of people and goods. This includes minimizing adverse community effects while maintaining or improving both highway and local traffic by striving for the following performance goals:

- An average travel run target speed of 65 mph for the entire US Highway 169 corridor (2001 average was 61 mph, and 61 mph through the Belle Plaine section).
- Improved safety and crash rates lower than the state average. Traffic volumes are predicted to increase 38 percent from 2000 to 2025 between Main Street and Meridian Street.

MnDOT published the TH 169 Corridor Belle Plaine Area Plan in 2003 that established a plan for the transition of TH 169 from a highway to a freeway in the city. The plan involves eliminating at-grade intersections and providing access to area businesses through frontage roads, including the following elements:

- Interchanges at Main Street and Meridian Street
- A south frontage road between Meridian Street and South Street, and a north frontage road between Meridian and Main Street.
- An extension of Enterprise Drive to Main Street/CR 64.
- Grade-separated pedestrian crossings
- An over/underpass in the vicinity of the western terminus of Belle Plaine Trail
- Essentially, all roads crossing the highway will be converted to an interchange, an over/underpass, or will be closed.

The interchange at MN 25/CR 64 was completed in the Spring of 2007, and provides primary access from the highway to the City of Belle Plaine. Construction has not begun on the Meridian Street interchange, and the current at-grade intersection remains open and protected by a two-way stop sign. Vehicles wishing to access or cross the highway must either use the Main Street interchange or use the at-grade crossing at Meridian

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Street. In the fall of 2008, MnDOT will start construction on a 3/4 access crossing at US Highway 169 and Meridian Street. Cross traffic will not be allowed from South Meridian Street to North Meridian Street. This poses a connectivity problem.

The US Highway 169 Belle Plaine Corridor is a four lane highway with traffic speeds of upwards of fifty-five miles an hour. The highway corridor currently divides the town due to the barrier of the highway itself and the difficulty of accessing the businesses and communities on either side. Access between north and south Belle Plaine is limited to the Main Street overpass and the proposed Meridian Street interchange.

The buildings on the highway are either generic strip mall, pole barn or big box structures one to two stories high. The buildings have large footprints, large parking lots, and are mostly rectilinear. The buildings front both the highway and the city grid and have large setbacks. The businesses are commercial and industrial. The commercial signage is tall, highway scale and oriented to the automobile. The landscaping in the US Highway 169 Belle Plaine Corridor is limited to low shrubs and grass with no overall landscape concept. The highway is oriented towards automobile traffic with few pedestrian elements. The north and south gateways of Belle Plaine are small signs with a small City logo or a small, standard MnDOT sign. There is no context signage alerting people using the highway about the Minnesota River or the Minnesota River Scenic Byway.

### Community Entry Points

The Belle Plaine entry points are located at the interchange of Main Street, the Meridian intersection, south of the Minnesota River bridge on County Road 25, County Road 3 approaching from the south and County Road 64 approaching from the east. Currently, there is some small City logo signage and some standard MnDOT City signage. All of the entrances could benefit from highway scale signage that is appropriate to the road usage hierarchy.