Innovation Districts:
Strategies and Insights for Madison, WI

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Luis Navarrete

Abbreviations

CIC	Cambridge Innovation Center
CRA	Cambridge Redevelopment Authority
KSA	Kendall Square Association
MATC	Madison Area Technical College
MBTA	Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
OZ	Opportunity Zone
PID	Pittsburgh Innovation District
R&D	Research and development
U.S.	United States
WPID	Walker's Point Innovation District

Executive Summary

Innovation districts have emerged as a resilient urban model that concentrates research institutions, startups, housing, and amenities in dense, mixed-use environments to drive economic growth, adaptability, and collaboration. With Wisconsin's Tech Hub designation accelerating the state's biohealth activity, establishing an innovation district along East Washington Avenue would channel this momentum by coordinating partners, focusing investment, and advancing an inclusive strategy for innovation-driven development. The purpose of this research is to understand the conditions that support successful innovation districts, assess how these conditions apply to Madison, and offer recommendations to guide the creation of a cohesive, resilient, and equitable innovation district. The analysis draws on a cross-case comparison of three U.S. innovation districts: Kendall Square, Cortex, and Walker's Point. It uses indicators related to governance, land use, institutional anchors, development history, and implementation outcomes. Findings show that innovation districts are shaped by strong anchor institutions, close proximity to research-oriented actors, strategic adaptive reuse, coordinated public-sector support, and the creation of mixed-use, accessible environments that foster collaboration and growth. With a growing knowledge-based economy and alignment with local development goals, the East Washington Avenue corridor is positioned to host a resilient innovation district that fosters coordinated, sustainable, long-term economic growth.

Introduction

As cities adapt to shifting economic, technological, and demographic pressures, innovation districts have emerged as a leading urban model for fostering economic growth. These districts use density and proximity to anchor institutions to create rich ecosystems where a mix of businesses, universities, research institutes, startup incubators, and entrepreneurs can cluster.[1] In doing so, they also stimulate the development of housing, retail, and cultural amenities that reinforce a vibrant, mixed-use environment.

Districts have transitioned from a traditional science technology park model to a denser urban one, intentionally designed as a mixed-use environment that integrates a mix of housing options, green infrastructure, and amenities, including schools, healthcare facilities, retail establishments, and cultural and entertainment venues.[2] Anchor institutions have also expanded beyond traditional R&D intensive actors to include ecosystem builders such as accelerators and incubators, public and private investors, and mission-driven organizations advancing the district's social, economic, and physical transformation.[3] Innovation districts have also proven to be a more resilient model, surviving the COVID-19 pandemic and are now transforming into localized manufacturing hubs, testbeds for clean energy and new technologies, and centers for workforce training in emerging regional economic sectors.[4] These expanded roles are attracting increased public, private, and civic investment into innovation districts and strengthening their position as a valuable tool for regional economic development.

Wisconsin's recent designation as a Regional Tech and Innovation Hub (Tech Hub) through the CHIPS and Science Act has catalyzed activity in the state's biotech sector and has unlocked millions of dollars in federal, state, and private funding across Madison and Milwaukee.[5] The hub has used these funds to expand workforce training, launch personalized medicine initiatives, and remove barriers to healthcare access. BioForward, located on Madison's west side in University Research Park, serves as the lead entity for the tech hub, which is now bustling with activity, collaboration, and investment, and is strengthening Wisconsin's position as a national center for biohealth innovation. However, University Research Park remains too far removed from downtown Madison and its surrounding anchor institutions to be optimal for a more central, denser district model. Establishing a formal innovation district along East Washington Avenue and the surrounding corridor would build on Madison's current momentum by concentrating investment, coordinating partners, and shaping a cohesive strategy for inclusive, innovation-driven growth.

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[1] Julie Wagner et al., "What Are Innovation Districts?," The Global Institute on Innovation Districts, July 30, 2024, https://giid.org/articles/what-are-innovation-districts/.

[2] Tan Yigitcanlar et al., "How Can Contemporary Innovation Districts Be Classified? A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Land Use Policy* 95 (June 2020): 104595, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104595; Wagner et al., "What Are Innovation Districts?"

[3] The Global Institute on Innovation Districts, *A "New-Type" of Anchor*, n.d., accessed April 13, 2026, https://giid.org/learn/who-shapes-districts/ecosystem-builders/new-anchors/.

[4] Bruce Katz and Julie Wagner, "The Next Wave of Innovation Districts," *The New Localism*, n.d., accessed April 13, 2026, https://www.thenewlocalism.com/newsletter/the-next-wave-of-innovation-districts/.

[5] Erin McGroarty, "Wisconsin Became a 'Biohealth Tech Hub' under Biden. The Hub Is Bustling.," The Cap Times, February 17, 2026, https://captimes.com/news/health/wisconsin-became-a-biohealth-tech-hub-under-biden-the-hub-is-bustling/article_1a19bc54-7766-4648-b369-f9d5f1ab7490.html.

Background

Innovation districts are compact, transit-accessible urban areas that combine mixed-use housing, office, and retail space with clusters of major research institutions, companies, startups, business incubators, and accelerators to enhance collaboration and spur economic growth.[6] They emerged in response to the need for faster, more seamless knowledge exchange and to meet the growing demand for walkable neighborhoods where people can live, work, and access amenities. Innovation districts promote efficient land use and combat urban sprawl by concentrating development in dense, mixed-use environments, leading to stronger transit use and revitalized urban cores. All districts have a mix of economic, physical, and networking resources that, when combined, form an "innovation ecosystem"; see Figure 1.[7] Since regional economies can vary significantly, each district develops a unique blend of assets shaped by its local context.

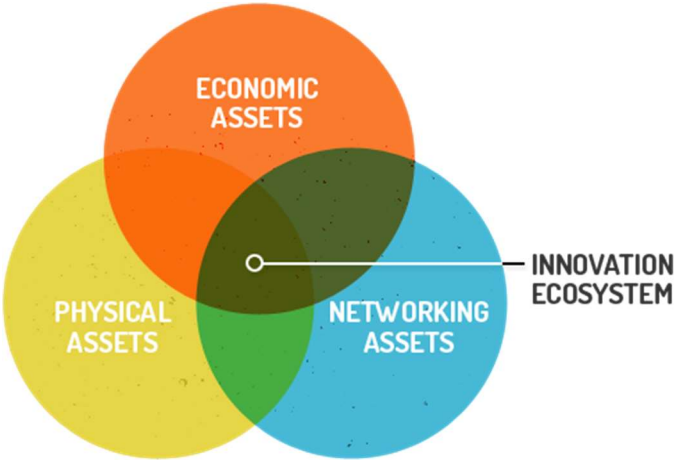


Figure 1. Innovation System Venn Diagram
Source: Brookings, The Rise of Innovation Districts, 2014

Economic assets are organizations that drive or support economic activity in an innovation-rich environment. Innovation drivers include research institutions, major companies, startups, and entrepreneurs developing new technology. Innovation cultivators support the growth of individuals and firms, including incubators, accelerators, tech-transfer offices, co-working spaces, and workforce training programs. Economic assets also include neighborhood amenities, such as grocery stores, cafés, medical offices, and retail outlets, which support the daily needs of residents and employees. Amenities improve the district's overall appeal by making it a desirable place to both live and work.

Physical assets are buildings, public spaces, and infrastructure that enable connectivity, collaboration, and innovation. Public assets like parks, plazas, and streets create active, accessible places for interaction and networking. Privately owned assets, such as flexible office spaces, shared labs, and even micro-housing, meet the diverse needs of firms and entrepreneurs in the district. Physical assets also serve as connective elements that tie the district together and link surrounding neighborhoods together with the broader metropolis. These include public transit, broadband, pedestrian networks, and other infrastructure investments.

Networking assets are the relationships and interactions among individuals, firms, and institutions that facilitate the exchange of ideas. Strong-tie networks built on trust and a shared history enhance collaboration, particularly within similar fields. These can include workshops, industry meetups, and technical groups, both within the organization and externally. Weak-tie networks connect people across different sectors or economic clusters that have infrequent

[6] Bruce Katz and Julie Wagner, "The Rise of Innovation Districts," *Brookings Institution*, May 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rise-of-innovation-districts/.
[7] Katz and Wagner, "The Rise of Innovation Districts."

contact. These can include hackathons, cross-industry gatherings, and general open-space interactions. Both types of networks are essential to the innovation process, as they provide access to new information and spark discovery through all available networks.

General District Models

There are three primary models for innovation districts in the U.S.[8] The *anchor plus* model is found in or near urban centers where large-scale mixed-use development is built around major anchor institutions and other related public and private actors. The *re-imagined urban area* model transforms waterfront and former industrial districts into innovation hubs by leveraging access to public transit, historic buildings, industrial infrastructure, and proximity to downtowns, particularly in high-rent cities. The third innovation-district model, *urbanized science parks*, describes traditional research campuses that are transforming from isolated, low-density office parks into more urban, mixed-use environments.

While the first two models are typically located in dense urban cores, science parks are distinguished by their suburban or exurban locations and large geographic footprints. Although they are also located near anchor institutions, traditional office and science parks can be more car-dependent with limited access to public transit. Urbanized science parks transform traditional suburban campuses by increasing density and mixed-use development, adding housing and retail, and enhancing transit connections to create more walkable environments.

Governance Structure

The long-term success of innovation districts depends on the effectiveness of the established governance model.[9] A well-structured governance framework is essential for fostering collaboration and avoiding organizational or political gridlock. There are three primary governance models that districts use to organize themselves and guide long-term development; see Figure 2.[10]

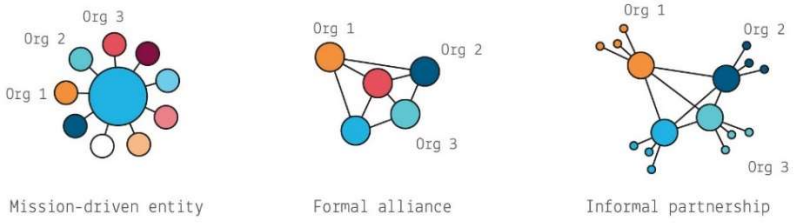


Figure 2. Innovation District Governance Models
Source: The Global Institute on Innovation Districts, Why governance matters, 2023.

Informal partnerships are early-stage, loosely coordinated groups of actors who voluntarily collaborate around a shared vision to advance an emerging innovation district. *Formal alliances* are structured agreements among government, institutional, or nonprofit partners that define roles and responsibilities for coordinating district development with built-in capital support (i.e., city-state alliances or alliances between different branches of city government). *Mission-driven*

[8] Katz and Wagner, "The Rise of Innovation Districts."
[9] Julie Wagner, "Why Governance Matters," The Global Institute on Innovation Districts, June 20, 2023, https://giid.org/research/why-governance-matters-an-analysis-on-how-innovation-districts-organize-for-success/.
[10] Wagner, "Why Governance Matters."

formal entities are often legally independent organizations created to lead district growth by filling ecosystem gaps, delivering new innovation infrastructure, and managing capital (i.e., nonprofits, associations, companies limited by guarantee, public-private development bodies).

In these governance structures, one or more primary actors control most of the district's assets, typically land, and guide its major decisions. A dominant-player model has one actor, such as a government or a single anchor institution, that dominates the district's governance and finances many core activities. In a multi-stakeholder governance model, multiple stakeholders serve on the board or on an empowered advisory committee.

Model Critiques

A central critique of innovation districts is that they function more as neoliberal urban development tools than effective strategies for fostering innovation.[11] This model often relies heavily on public-private partnerships, branding, deregulation, and place-based financial incentives. Scholars argue that innovation districts emerged as a reactive response to the Global Financial Crisis rather than a long-term innovation policy. Cities used it as a low-cost strategy to sustain economic activity by replacing stalled corporate investments with entrepreneurial funding. However, once markets recovered, cities reverted to larger real estate development deals, displacing entrepreneurs who had supported the districts. As districts evolve into high-end real estate areas, rising costs squeeze out startups and reduce affordable housing options. Scholars also highlight governance concerns, particularly that innovation districts can obscure the growing influence of private actors in shaping urban development and often lack clear accountability mechanisms, resulting in governance structures that rely more on entrepreneurial actors than public institutions.

A second major critique of these districts is that over-specialization around one or more related industries may undermine long-term resilience and adaptability.[12] Concentrated growth in a narrow set of sectors can weaken economic resilience by reducing diversity, driving up housing costs, and displacing service-oriented businesses essential to community vitality. This over-specialization, particularly in the technology sector, makes it more difficult for districts to adapt to external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While tech firms could quickly shift to remote work, service-oriented businesses dependent on foot traffic were disproportionately affected, accelerating displacement and widening socio-economic disparities. Overall, innovation districts can boost economic growth but may also weaken resilience if not balanced with economic diversification, accountability measures, and intentional policy interventions.

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[11] "A Critique of Innovation Districts: Entrepreneurial Living and the Burden of Shouldering Urban Development - Carla M. Kayanan, 2022," accessed April 6, 2026, https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/doi/10.1177/0308518X211049445.

[12] Yihao Wu, "Innovation Districts and Urban Economic Resilience: Lessons from Kendall Square," *News & Views*, n.d.

Case Study Analysis

I identified three U.S. innovation district case studies to examine patterns, strategies, and conditions relevant to Madison's economic and urban development context. I then used a cross-case analysis to draw key takeaways from each case and synthesized recurring themes that shaped district development. The primary considerations for case selection were:

- **Proximity to urban centers:**
  District is in or adjacent to a major urban core and along major thoroughfares.
- **Inclusion of mixed-use, transit-accessible, high-density environments:**
  District demonstrates characteristics associated with innovation ecosystems, including compact development and access to public transit.
- **Presence of research institutions and supporting anchors:**
  District includes major research-oriented anchors that drive R&D activity, as well as broader institutions that balance the innovation ecosystem.
- **Applicability to a university-anchored city:**
  District reflects a similar scale and university-anchored economic structure.

The three case studies are: Kendall Square (Cambridge, MA), Cortex Innovation District (St. Louis, MO), and Walker's Point Innovation District (Milwaukee, WI). Kendall Square was also selected because it is widely considered the first and most prominent example of an innovation district.[13] It provides a benchmark for understanding the core elements of successful, university-anchored innovation ecosystems. Cortex Innovation District was selected because it offers a strong comparison as a midwestern, research-anchored district in a peer city. St. Louis is recognized as a Madison peer in the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago's Peer City Identification Tool's Outlook category, reflecting similar demographic and economic trends.[14] Walker's Point Innovation District was chosen because it is the closest and newest innovation district, recently formalized and located within Wisconsin's biotech hub.[15] Its early-stage development provides insight into how innovation districts can form in similar state and regional contexts.

For each case, I examined the district's governance structure, origins and anchor institutions, zoning and land-use mix, implementation challenges and outcomes, and initial funding mechanisms and public incentives. These indicators were selected because they capture the core elements that shape how innovation districts form, operate, and grow. They also reflect the physical environment and economic conditions that influence district development. Using these indicators across all cases enables a consistent comparison of districts to determine which strategies are most relevant to Madison. The site analysis used similar indicators to examine the physical, demographic, economic, and institutional conditions of the East Washington Avenue study area and to identify the opportunities and constraints for future development.

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[13] "Innovation District Profile Slideshow," Brookings Institution, accessed April 17, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/innovation-district-profile-slideshow/.
[14] "About the Peer City Identification Tool," Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, accessed April 17, 2026, https://www.chicagofed.org/region/peer-cities-identification-tool/about-the-peer-cities-identification-tool.
[15] "Wisconsin Biohealth Tech Hub," U.S. Economic Development Administration, accessed April 17, 2026, https://www.eda.gov/funding/programs/regional-technology-and-innovation-hubs/2023/Wisconsin-Biohealth-Tech-Hub.

The research for each case study was done primarily through a consolidation and synthesis of online resources, including planning documents, academic articles, municipal reports, news articles, and district materials. This approach provided insight into how each innovation district emerged, evolved, and positioned itself within its respective urban context. The research was guided by three core questions:

- What defines successful innovation districts, and how do they emerge?
- How do physical, economic, and institutional conditions shape the viability of innovation districts in mid-sized U.S. cities?
- What strategies are most applicable to Madison's development patterns, regulatory environment, and economic assets?

Kendall Square

Overview

Kendall Square is located in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Figure 3). It is a mission-driven formal entity that uses an "anchor plus" model incorporating multi-stakeholder involvement through the Kendall Square Association (KSA).[16] The KSA has a 29-member board of directors and is a 501(c)6 nonprofit organization.[17]

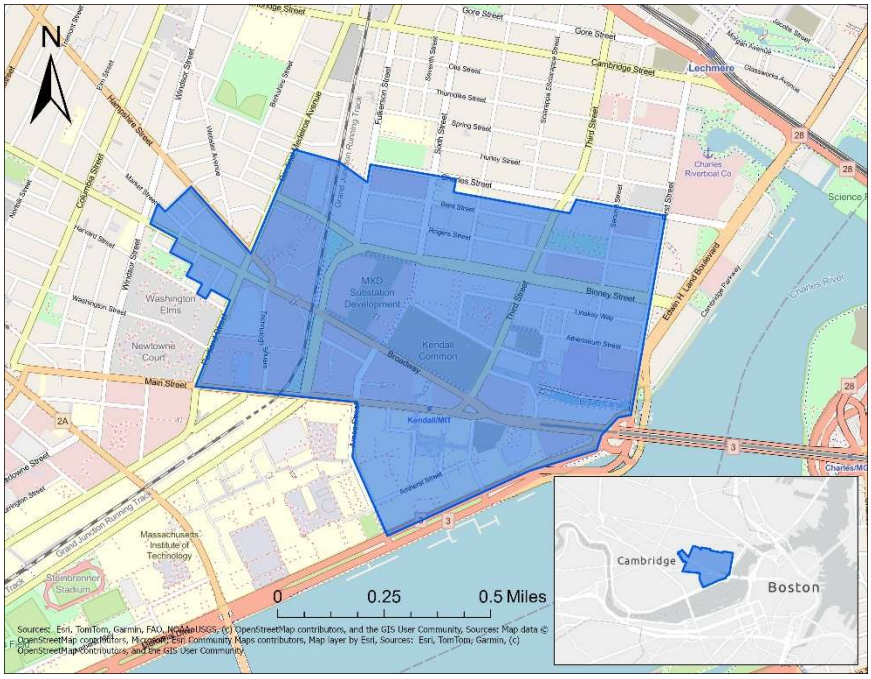


Figure 3. Kendall Square Boundary

In 2024, the City of Cambridge had an estimated population of over 121,000, with Kendall Square estimated at 4,905 residents.[18] The district is located on the Charles River next to Longfellow Bridge, just off Massachusetts Route 28, one of the area's major thoroughfares.

History

By the turn of the 20th century, Cambridge was a major industrial hub.[19] In 1924, the city approved a new zoning ordinance based on the Euclidean zoning method, dividing Cambridge into residential, business, and industrial uses, forcing heavy industries into industrial zones away from residential areas. Later zoning revisions further restricted heavy industry and contributed to the decline of manufacturing firms in the area.[20] By the mid-20th century, East Cambridge's industrial landscape largely disappeared, including the city's largest employer, the Lever Brothers soap factory.[21]

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[16] "About KSA," Kendall Square Association, accessed April 6, 2026, https://kendallsquare.org/about/.
[17] "Executive Director," Kendall Square Association, April 19, 2022, https://kendallsquare.org/executive-director/.
[18] "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Cambridge, Massachusetts," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed April 9, 2026, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cambridgecitymassachusetts/PST045224; Cambridge Community Development Department, "Kendall Square Cambridge Commercial District Assessment," 2024, https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/EconDev/Districts/KendallSq/KendallSq_District_Assessment_2024.pdf.
[19] "A Brief History of Zoning in Cambridge," *History Cambridge*, n.d., accessed April 2, 2026, https://historycambridge.org/articles/a-brief-history-of-zoning-in-cambridge/.
[20] Cambridge Community Development Department, "Cambridge, MA Zoning Centennial," ArcGIS StoryMaps, July 7, 2025, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9ebec4015817472795d5ba40b9c44f38.
[21] Michael Blanding, "The Past and Future of Kendall Square," MIT Technology Review, August 18, 2015, https://www.technologyreview.com/2015/08/18/10816/the-past-and-future-of-kendall-square/.

In 1960, MIT purchased the abandoned site and launched the Technology Square building. This marked the first major shift toward research-oriented uses and attracted companies like IBM and Polaroid to move into the building. In 1965, the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority (CRA) and the city adopted the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan to provide land for NASA's Electronics Research Center.[22] After the project was abandoned, a significant amount of land remained unoccupied, leaving the CRA and the city to determine how to reuse it and eventually leading them to create a mixed-use development district. Land in the district is now owned by a mix of MIT, the CRA, and private developers.

The turning point came with the arrival of early biotech firms such as Biogen and Genzyme, supported by Cambridge's 1977 ordinance permitting recombinant DNA research under strict regulations.[23] Although controversial, this regulatory certainty enabled the district's first wave of life-science growth. In the decades that followed, startups clustered near MIT, and the Cambridge Innovation Center emerged as a flexible incubation space for early-stage firms.[24] This attracted more tech and pharmaceutical companies, including Google, Amazon, Novartis, and Pfizer. Figure 4 highlights other anchor institutions within and near the district.[25]

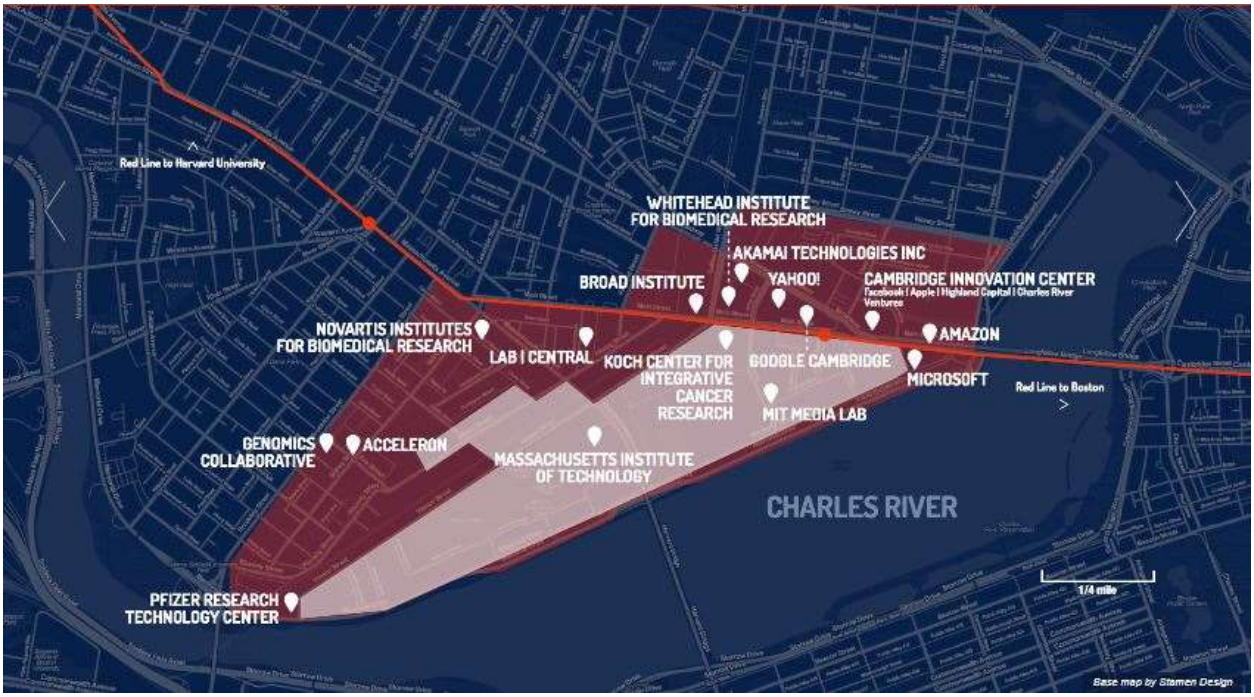


Figure 4. Kendall Square Anchor Map
Source: Brookings, Innovation District Profile Slideshow, 2014

[22] "Kendall Square Overview," Cambridge Redevelopment Authority, accessed April 17, 2026, https://www.cambridgeredevelopment.org/kendall-square-overview.
[23] Joseph Dalton, "City Council Approves DNA Research," Harvard Crimson, February 8, 1977, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1977/2/8/city-council-approves-dna-research-pthe/.
[24] Blanding, "The Past and Future of Kendall Square."
[25] "Innovation District Profile Slideshow," Brookings Institution, accessed May 3, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/innovation-district-profile-slideshow/.

Transportation and Amenities

Kendall Square has a subway stop on the MBTA Red Line, which provides direct service to Harvard University and the City of Boston. There is also a Green Line station, a 12-minute walk away from the Kendall/MIT stop. There is also a free public shuttle service, EZ Ride, operated by the Charles River Transportation Management Association that connects North Station in Boston to Cambridgeport, Kendall Square, and MIT.[26] Besides EX Ride stops, there are also stops for MBTA routes 64, 68, 85, and CT2, see Figure 5.

Kendall Square offers a mix of amenities, including cafés, breweries, and a grocery store.[27] The district contains cultural anchors such as the MIT Museum and the Kendall Square Cinema, as well as public spaces, parks, and gardens that enhance walkability.

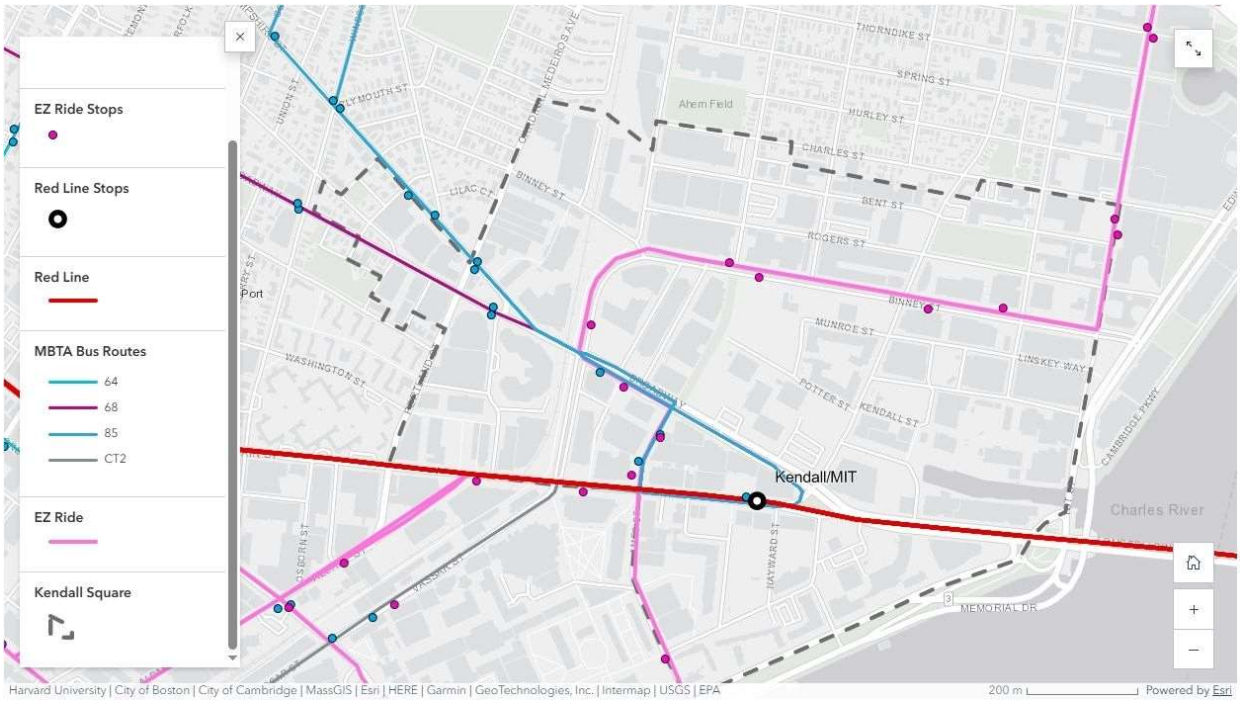


Figure 5. MBTA Stops in Kendall Square Map.
Source: Cambridge Redevelopment Authority, 2020.

[26] Cambridge Redevelopment Authority, "MBTA Bus and EZ Ride," ArcGIS StoryMaps, May 20, 2020, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9f9bb1cb536046758bb00e13f07ef7ba.
[27] Boston University, "Getting to Know Your Neighborhood: Kendall Square," Boston University, January 26, 2017, https://www.bu.edu/articles/2023/getting-to-know-your-neighborhood-kendall-square/.

Zoning and Land Use

Appendix A indicates that Kendall Square is primarily designated for office and light manufacturing uses.[28] They also have a significant share of mixed-use zoning. In Appendix B, we can see that the area is primarily commercial, with pockets of educational, residential, mixed-use, and open space. Figure 6 reveals that commercial uses dominate the area (50%), including office, lab, and R&D space supporting tech, biotech, and corporate research. Educational uses come second (11%), followed by Residential (8%), and Industrial (6%).[29]

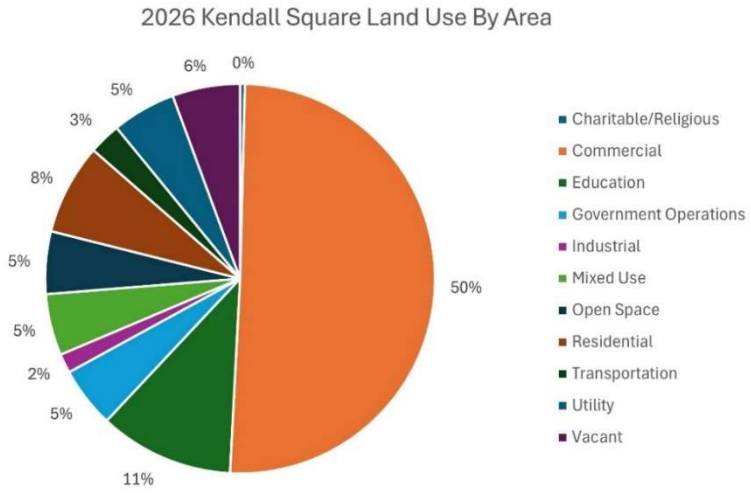


Figure 6. Kendall Square Land Use Overview By Area.
Source: City of Cambridge GIS, 2026.

Key Takeaways

- Kendall Square's proximity to downtown Boston creates a powerful regional partnership, giving the district access to the city's workforce and economic anchors.
- The removal of industrial land uses unlocked large tracts of land that could be repurposed for research and development facilities and other commercial uses.
- The dense clustering of startups and investors around the Cambridge Innovation Center accelerated entrepreneurial collaboration and lowered barriers to entry.
- Local regulatory action enabled cutting-edge biotechnology research to take place, setting a precedent for innovation-supportive governance.

[28] Cambridge Community Development Department, "Zoning Ordinance Maps," January 26, 2026, https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/Maps/Zoning/cddmap_zoning_base_11x17_20260209.pdf.
[29] "Land Use - GIS," City of Cambridge, January 28, 2026, https://www.cambridgema.gov/GIS/gisdatadictionary/CDD/CDD_LandUse.

Cortex Innovation District

Overview

Cortex Innovation District is located in St. Louis, Missouri (Figure 7). It is a mission-driven formal entity that uses an "anchor plus" model with multi-stakeholder involvement through its 15-member staff and 25-member board of directors and is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.[30]

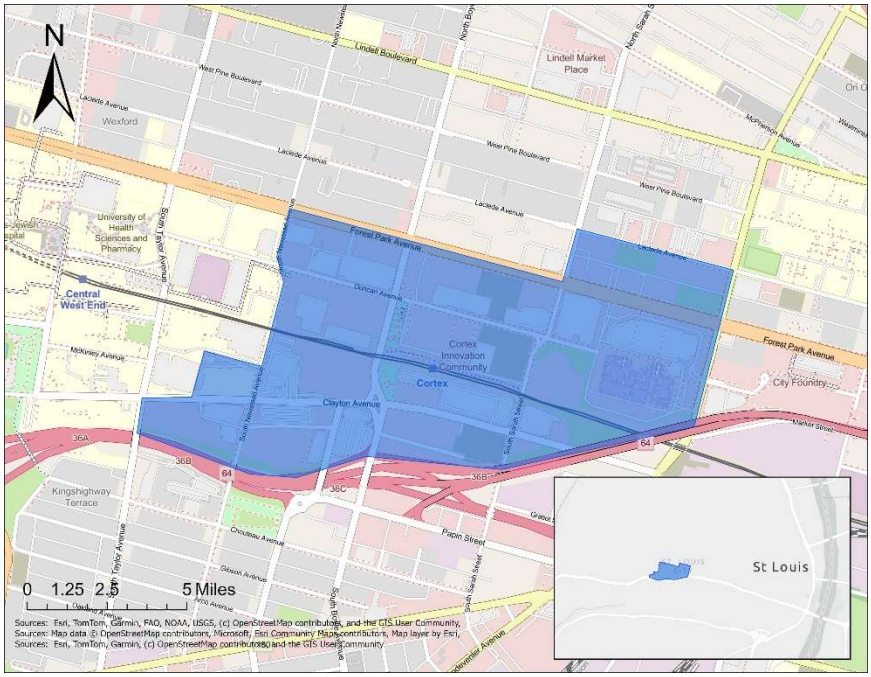


Figure 7. Cortex Innovation District Boundary.

In 2024, the City of St. Louis had an estimated population of over 279,000.[31] The district is located near downtown St. Louis along two major thoroughfares: Forest Park Avenue and Interstate 64.

History

St. Louis began as a riverfront village that experienced unprecedented growth, prompting residents to leave the crowded city for the suburbs.[32] By the turn of the 20th century, the "City Beautiful" movement grew in popularity as civic leaders pushed for beautification, parks, boulevards, and infrastructure improvements. In 1947, Harland Bartholomew's comprehensive plan aimed to update St. Louis' zoning laws, revitalize the central business district, and enhance public transportation and green spaces.[33] However, much of the central corridor was eventually left with underused industrial and commercial land.

In 2002, Cortex was founded with support from the City of St. Louis and the leaders of five anchor institutions: Washington University in St. Louis, Saint Louis University, the University of Missouri-St. Louis, Barnes-Jewish Christian HealthCare, and the Missouri Botanical Garden.[34] The idea for an innovation district emerged as a way to replicate Kendall Square's model in St. Louis. The site was a 200-acre stretch of underdeveloped land along the city's central corridor, just four miles west of downtown. Its founders contributed a total of $29 million to buy land and

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[30] "Our Team," Cortex Innovation District, accessed April 6, 2026, https://www.cortexstl.org/about/our-team; "Our History," Cortex Innovation District, accessed April 13, 2026, https://www.cortexstl.org/about/our-history.
[31] "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: St. Louis, Missouri," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed April 2, 2026, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/stlouiscitymissouri/PST045224.
[32] "A Preservation Plan for St. Louis, Part I: Historic Contexts," City of St. Louis, accessed April 6, 2026, https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/cultural-resources/preservation-plan/Part-I-Community-Planning.cfm.
[33] Natalie Fang, "Zoning Dynamics of St. Louis: A Geospatial Analysis," ArcGIS StoryMaps, December 14, 2023, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/4612c508116545da8c78373090bc93f2.
[34] Cortex Innovation District, "Our History."

serve as collateral for loans, with Washington University contributing the most at $15 million.[35] The mayor of St. Louis also granted tax abatements and used eminent domain to allow Cortex to redevelop the area more broadly. In the early 2010s, Cortex broadened its focus beyond life sciences by opening its doors to startups and tech firms and by launching the 3.5-acre Cortex Commons alongside the Cambridge Innovation Center's first U.S. outpost outside Massachusetts.[36] This shift helped attract major companies such as Microsoft, which opened its first Midwest headquarters in the district in 2018.[37] Figure 8 highlights the anchor institutions within and around the district.[38] In 2024, Washington University School of Medicine constructed a new $616 million, 609,000-square-foot neuroscience research building in the district.[39]

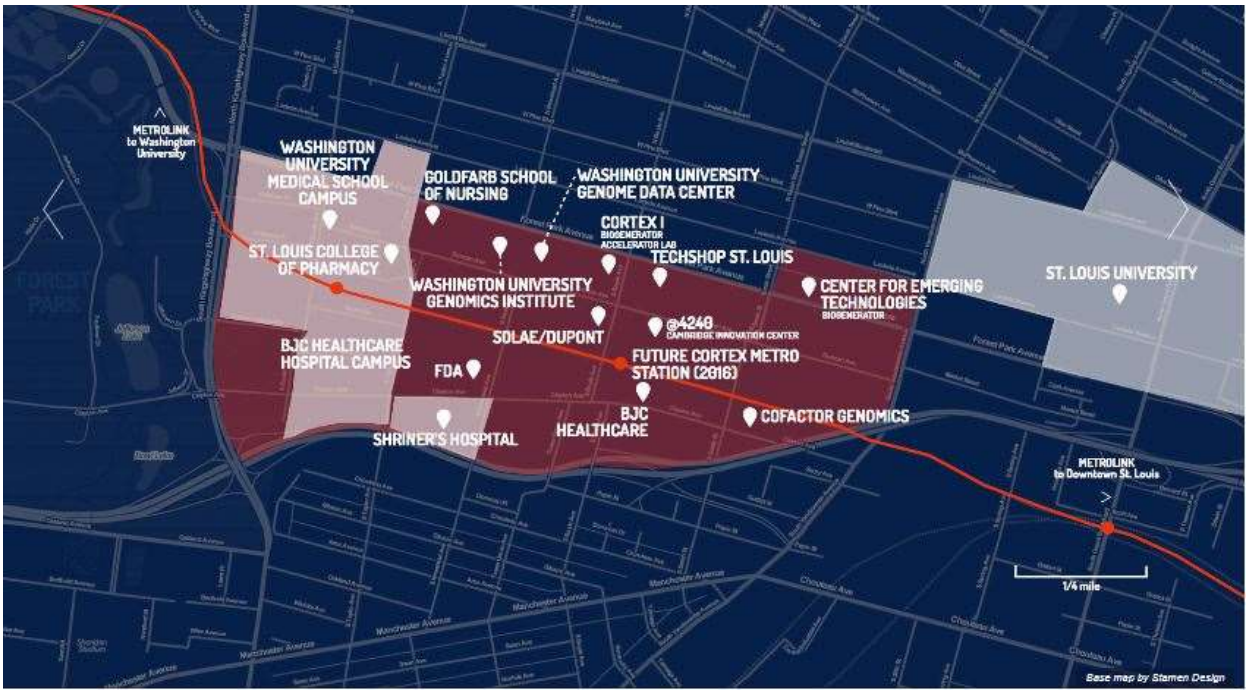


Figure 8. Cortex Anchor Map
Source: Brookings, Innovation District Profile Slideshow, 2014

[35] Jonathan Allen, "The Creation of Cortex: Cortex Special Feature, Chapter 2, 2002-2009," Entrepreneur Quarterly, February 28, 2017, https://entrepreneurquarterly.com/creation-cortex-cortex-special-feature-chapter-2-2002-2009/.
[36] Jonathan Allen, "Cortex Shifts Focus: Cortex Special Feature, Chapter 3, 2010-2016," Entrepreneur Quarterly, March 1, 2017, https://entrepreneurquarterly.com/cortex-shifts-focus-cortex-special-feature-chapter-3-2010-2016/.
[37] St Louis Public Radio, "Microsoft Tech Center Opens in St. Louis Cortex Innovation Community," STLPR, September 19, 2018, https://www.stlpr.org/economy-business/2018-09-19/microsoft-tech-center-opens-in-st-louis-cortex-innovation-community.
[38] Brookings Institution, "Innovation District Profile Slideshow."
[39] Elizabethe Durando, "Newly Opened Jeffrey T. Fort Neuroscience Research Building Dedicated," WashU Medicine, January 25, 2024, https://medicine.washu.edu/news/newly-opened-jeffrey-t-fort-neuroscience-research-building-dedicated/.

Transportation and Community Amenities

The area includes transit access through the nearby Cortex MetroLink station and MetroBus routes.[40] This line provides a direct connection to Washington University's main campus and downtown St. Louis. The district also has the Brickline Greenway, a shared-use path featuring bike repair stations and parking locations.

Cortex has a limited selection of restaurants and cafes, suggesting it is still maturing. Figure 9 shows that four hotels and five dining options are within a 15-minute walk of the district center.[41] However, it benefits from its proximity to St. Louis' Forest Park, which includes the St. Louis Zoo, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Missouri Historical Museum, and the St. Louis Science Center.[42] Public spaces play an increased role in fostering activity and identity.



Figure 9. Cortex District Map.
Source: Cortex Innovation District.

[40] "Getting Here: Visit Cortex," Cortex Innovation District, accessed April 6, 2026, https://www.cortexstl.org/gather/getting-here.
[41] Cortex Innovation District, "Getting Here: Visit Cortex."
[42] "Cortex Innovation Community," CRG, accessed April 6, 2026, https://www.realcrg.com/cortex-innovation-community.

Zoning and Land Use

Appendix C shows that Cortex is primarily zoned as an unrestricted district with some industrial and commercial/office zoning.[43] This creates a flexible land-use environment that supports research, tech, and mixed commercial activity.

In Appendix D, we see that the district is split between campus and central-area land uses.[44] A campus is a large institutional area granted a special land-use designation so it can plan and grow flexibly while connecting to the surrounding city, such as a university or medical center. Central Areas-West is a dense, mixed-use part of the city where taller buildings are allowed, and development is designed to be walkable, bikeable, and transit-friendly with high-quality pedestrian infrastructure. This mix is good for the district because it allows for strong institutional anchors to coordinate growth within a dense, walkable, mixed-use urban area.

Key Takeaways

- Cortex's proximity to downtown St. Louis, combined with its positioning along two major thoroughfares, strengthens regional connectivity and economic positioning by linking the district to some of the city's strongest institutional anchors.
- The district's formation began with an initial investment from established anchor institutions, which provided early credibility and helped build momentum.
- Strong public-sector backing and targeted incentives supported early development, reduced risk, and enabled the district to acquire land and attract tenants.
- The existing amenity mix supports innovation activity but lacks the density and diversity found in larger, more established districts.

[43] "Citywide Zoning District Map," 34, City of St. Louis, accessed April 13, 2026, https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/documents/Citywide-Zoning-District-Map.cfm.
[44] "Strategic Land Use Plan of the St. Louis Comprehensive Plan," 22, City of St. Louis, accessed April 9, 2026, https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/planning/adopted-plans/strategic-land-use/index.cfm.

Walker's Point Innovation District

Overview

Walker's Point Innovation District (WPID) is located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Figure 10). The district is centered on Walker's Point but stretches east to include the Harbor District and west to include portions of the Menomonee Valley and Walker Square.[45]

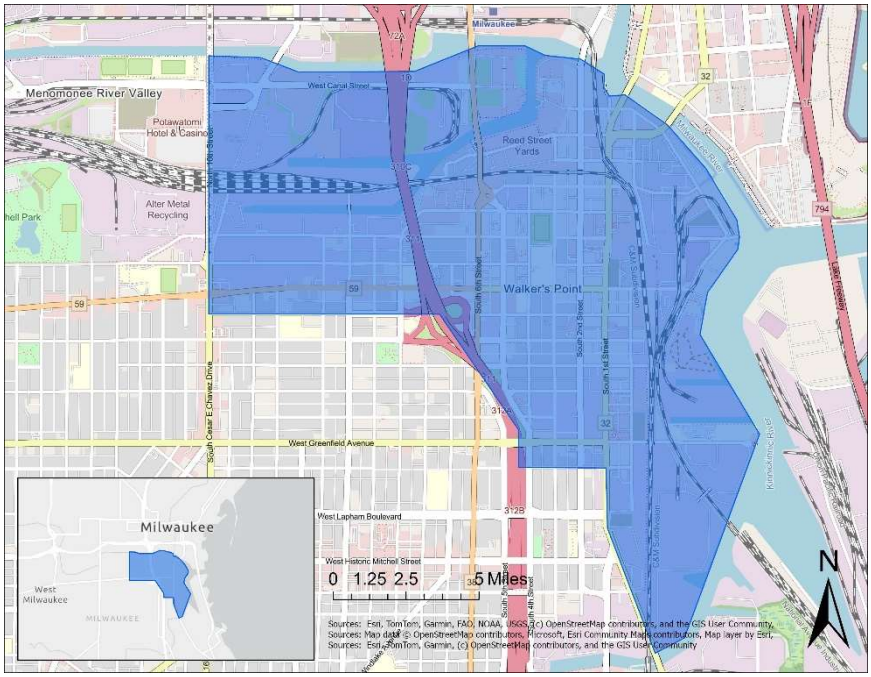


Figure 10. Walker's Point Innovation District Boundary.

WPID is a mission-driven formal alliance that uses a "re-imagined urban area" model and incorporates multi-stakeholder involvement. The district has a public-private ownership model where a local elected official partnered with a local entrepreneur to oversee the district's initial launch and guide its development.[46]

In 2024, Milwaukee had an estimated population of more than 563,000 residents, with Walker's Point estimated at more than 7,600 residents.[47] The district is located along the Menomonee and Kinnickinnic Rivers. It is located southeast of downtown Milwaukee along South 1st Street and West National Avenue, two major thoroughfares. It is also off Interstate 43 and Interstate 94, major freight and commuter arteries.

History

In the mid-19th century, Walker's Point was an industrial center of Milwaukee, with factories along the Menomonee River.[48] During the 1960s, the construction of the Milwaukee freeway system divided the neighborhood. As the city pushed unwanted urban-renewal projects into the area, residents formed Historic Walker's Point, Inc. (HWP) to protect the neighborhood and lead restoration efforts. By 1981, they became Historic Milwaukee, Inc., broadening their mission to include citywide preservation initiatives.

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[45] Jeramey Jannene, "Milwaukee Has Its First 'Innovation District,'" Urban Milwaukee, October 15, 2025, https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2025/10/15/milwaukee-has-its-first-innovation-district/.
[46] Jose Perez, "Milwaukee Launches First Innovation District in Walker's Point," City of Milwaukee, September 29, 2025, https://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/ccCouncil/News/2025/District-12/12---Innovation-District-Release.pdf.
[47] "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Milwaukee, Wisconsin," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed April 6, 2026, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/milwaukeecitywisconsin/PST045224; Data You Can Use, "Walker's Point Neighborhood Data Portrait," July 2024, https://www.datayoucanuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Walkers-Point-2022ACS5Year-July-2024.pdf.
[48] "Walker's Point," *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, n.d., accessed April 13, 2026, https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/walkers-point/.

By the mid-2010s, Walker's Point saw growing startup activity with incubators like Ward4 and firms such as gener8tor and PKWARE.[49] Some anchor companies, such as Rockwell Automation, were founded in Walker's Point and have continued to thrive.[50] In 2015, the city approved the Walker's Point Strategic Action Plan, which supported adaptive reuse of historic industrial buildings and mixed-income development, strengthening the area's creative and entrepreneurial base.[51] It also established a "Creative Corridor" to support arts, culture, and small businesses. In 2025, Walker's Point became Milwaukee's first innovation district based on its business density and central location, with the city committing to reduce zoning and permitting barriers.[52] The idea emerged as a way to strengthen the city's technology industry. District partners include i.c.stars, the MKE Tech Hub Coalition, and the Milky Way Tech Hub. The model is also intended to be replicated citywide.[53]

Transportation and Key Amenities

The district connects to key transit routes, including the Green Line and routes 15, 18, 19, 20, 24, 56, and 81, linking the neighborhood to downtown Milwaukee and surrounding areas; see Appendix E.[54] It also features quick connections to I-43 and I-94, with direct access to I-794.

Walker's Point contains a dense cluster of restaurants, bars, breweries, and cafés.[55] Within the district boundary are the Mitchell Park Domes, the Harley-Davidson Museum, and the National Bobblehead Hall of Fame & Museum. It is also near downtown, the Third Ward, Marquette University, and the Menomonee Valley. Apart from Mitchell Park, the neighborhood only contains a handful of small, scattered pockets of green space.

Zoning and Land Use

Appendix F shows that the district is primarily zoned for industrial uses along the Harbor District and Menomonee Valley, and for medium-density residential in the core.[56] There are scattered commercial uses that function as a buffer between the residential areas and the Menomonee Valley industrial zones. This creates a mix of adaptable industrial space with dense residential activity, providing the physical flexibility needed for an innovation district.

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[49] Alison Bauter, "Gener8tor Moving to Ward 4 as New Startup Hub Plans Opening," Milwaukee Business Journal, April 28, 2015, https://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/news/2015/04/28/gener8tor-moving-to-ward-4-as-new-startup-hub.html.
[50] Matthew Costello, "Allen-Bradley (Rockwell Automation)," *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, n.d., accessed April 5, 2026, https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/allen-bradley-rockwell-automation/.
[51] "Walker's Point Action Plan," accessed April 9, 2026, https://city.milwaukee.gov/AreaPlans/NearSouth/WalkersPoint.
[52] Jannene, "Milwaukee Has Its First 'Innovation District.'"
[53] Jose Perez, "Creation of Milwaukee's First Innovation District Approved at Committee," *Urban Milwaukee*, October 1, 2025, https://urbanmilwaukee.com/pressrelease/creation-of-milwaukees-first-innovation-district-approved-at-committee/.
[54] Milwaukee County Transit, "Spring 2026 Milwaukee County Transit Guide," 2026, 20, https://www.ridemcts.com/getattachment/Routes-Schedules/System-Map/2026-MAR-System-Map-Double-Sided.pdf?lang=en-US.
[55] "Walker's Point Association," Visit Milwaukee, accessed April 9, 2026, https://www.visitmilwaukee.org/listing/walkers-point-association/1951/.
[56] "Zoning Map," City of Milwaukee, accessed April 9, 2026, https://city.milwaukee.gov/DCD/Planning/PlanningAdministration/ZoningMap.

According to Appendix G, the areas east of the highway and along the Harbor District are zoned for Transportation/Utilities and Manufacturing/Warehousing uses.[57] Closer to Downtown, the zoning shifts to Commercial and Mixed-Use districts with some high-density residential. West of the highway and into the district's core, the pattern transitions to low- and medium-density housing. This means that the district must work to bridge the heavy industrial areas and residential neighborhoods, relying on adaptive reuse and targeted investment to function as a cohesive innovation hub.

Key Takeaways

- The district's adaptive reuse of industrial buildings as a foundation strategy maximizes the utility of vacant or underutilized structures to create affordable spaces for emerging firms and creatives.
- Although outdated, the Walker's Point Strategic Action Plan continues to serve as an influential land-use framework that guides decision-making across the neighborhood.
- Long-standing neighborhood and community involvement in historic preservation has helped shape public redevelopment priorities and reinforced the district's commitment to its historic character.

[57] "Walker's Point Action Plan."

Case Study Findings

Five themes were identified that highlight the common strategies driving innovation and economic growth in the case studies.

Table 1. Case Study Key Findings.

Strong Anchor Institutions	Each district is anchored by a mix of major private-sector firms and cultural institutions, which provide stability and credibility and attract additional companies, talent, and investment.
Proximity to Research-Oriented Actors	The districts are located near major universities and research institutions, facilitating relationships with academia and firms in emerging industries.
Adaptive Reuse	The districts began as underutilized or declining industrial areas. They repurposed existing buildings, which lowered costs and created affordable spaces for startups, local entrepreneurs, and new businesses.
Public-Sector Support	Local governments provided incentives that attracted businesses and encouraged investment. The districts also had political champions to help activate the policy tools that accelerated development.
Mixed-Use and Accessible	The districts incorporated mixed-use, residential, retail, and office spaces to create vibrant communities. They also used public transportation to maintain strong connections to major cities and surrounding anchors.

Site Analysis

The study area is centered around East Washington Avenue, a vital transit corridor in Madison's isthmus (Figure 11). It is a major thoroughfare with strong multimodal transit access and proximity to major institutions and community assets. The area is well positioned for continued eastward expansion and development, aligning with the Northeast Area Plan's goals to increase housing supply and high-intensity development along East Washington Avenue and the Bus Rapid Transit corridor.[58]

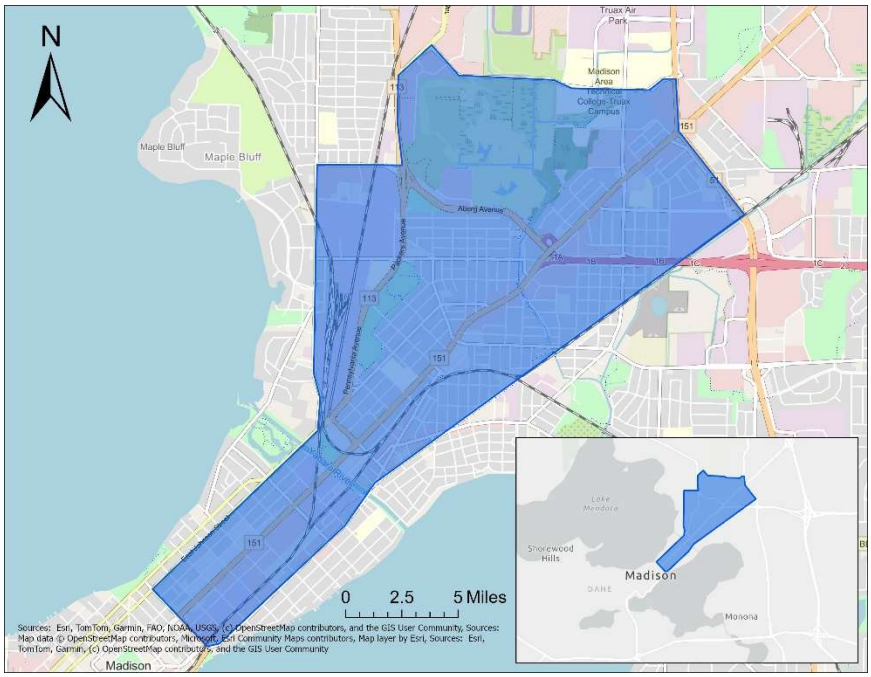


Figure 11. Madison Study Area

In 2024, the City of Madison had an estimated population of over 285,000 residents.[59] The resident workforce was concentrated in three major sectors: Educational Services (16.5%), Professional, Scientific, & Technical Services (15.4%), and Health Care & Social Assistance (15.1%); see Figure 12.[60] This reflects the city's strong academic, research, and health-care anchors and highlights the central role that universities, hospitals, and knowledge-based industries play in shaping the local labor market.

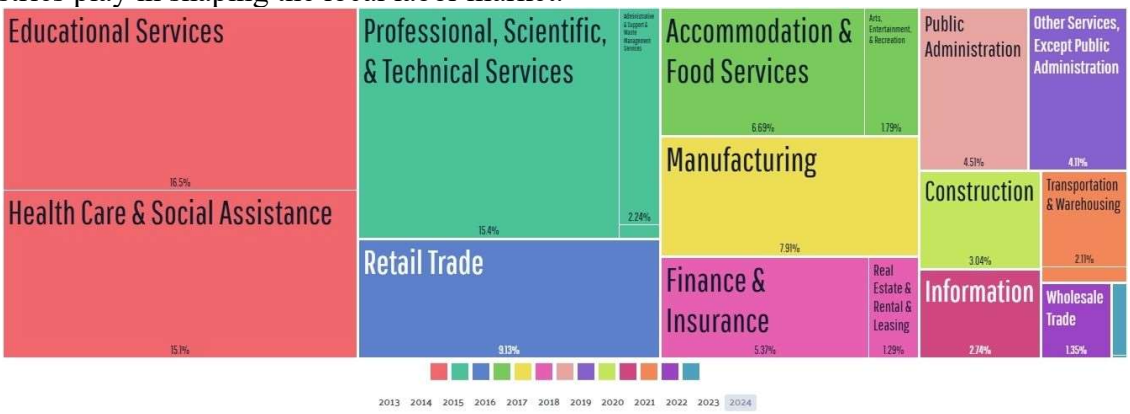


Figure 12. Madison Employment by Industries, 2024.
Source: Data USA, Census Bureau ACS 5-year Estimate.

[58] "Northeast Area Plan," City of Madison, September 10, 2024, https://www.cityofmadison.com/dpced/planning/documents/area-plans/northeast/NortheastAreaPlan.pdf.
[59] "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Madison, Wisconsin," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed April 9, 2026, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/madisoncitywisconsin/LND110210.
[60] "Madison, WI - Industries," Data USA, accessed April 9, 2026, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/madison-wi/.

The study area has an estimated population of over 18,000 residents and contains nearly 11,000 total housing units.[61] Adults in the study area are highly educated: 8.8 percent of residents have an associate's degree, and 56.7 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.[62] This data suggests a strong local talent pool supported by the area's highest employers.

The economic landscape in the study area features a high concentration of small service-oriented businesses; see Table 2.[63] The Other Services (except Public Administration) sector represents the largest share of businesses (16.9%), and includes companies engaged in providing services not categorized elsewhere, such as equipment and machinery repairing, promoting or administering religious activities, and advocacy.[64] This sector is followed by Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (11.7%), Retail Trade (11.1%), Accommodation and Food Services (9.3%), and Health Care and Social Assistance (8.8%). This reflects a diverse ecosystem with a mix of health care providers, professional offices, retail, restaurants, and hospitality.

Table 2. Top Five Industries by Businesses in Madison Study Area, 2024.
Source: Esri Business Analyst, Business Summary Report (NAICS), 2026.

NAICS Code	Business Count	Percentage of Total Businesses
Other Services Except Public Admin (81)	176	16.9%
Professional, Scientific & Tech Services (54)	122	11.7%
Retail Trade (44-45)	115	11.1%
Accommodation & Food Services (72)	97	9.3%
Health Care & Social Assistance (62)	91	8.8%

The study area's employment is anchored by government jobs, with Public Administration accounting for the largest share at 17.3 percent; see Table 3.[65] Around it is a growing cluster of knowledge-based firms, with Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services making up nearly 10 percent of employment. Manufacturing industries remain at 9.5 percent, indicating that the local workforce is available for potential light industrial use. Accommodation and Food Services (9.3%) and Retail Trade (8.0%) further diversify the local economy. Public Administration, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services, and Other Services serve as the corridor's anchor industries, with other industries clustering around them. Additionally, manufacturing is a major employment sector despite accounting for only 4 percent of businesses, suggesting that a few large employers dominate the sector. Overall, the corridor has a diverse, service-oriented market supported by a large government workforce and many small local firms.

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[61] Esri, *ACS Population Summary* (Environmental Systems Research Institute, 2025).
[62] Esri, *Community Profile* (Environmental Systems Research Institute, 2025).
[63] Esri, *Business Summary Report (NAICS)* (Environmental Systems Research Institute, 2026).
[64] "Other Services (except Public Administration): NAICS 81," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed April 9, 2026, https://www.bls.gov/iag/tgs/iag81.htm.
[65] Esri, *Business Summary Report (NAICS)*.

Table 3. Top Five Industries by Employment in Madison Study Area, 2024.
Source: Esri Business Analyst, Business Summary Report (NAICS), 2026.

NAICS Code	Employee Count	Percentage of Total Employees
Public Administration (92)	2,436	17.3%
Professional, Scientific & Tech Services (54)	1,393	9.9%
Manufacturing (31-33)	1,339	9.5%
Accommodation & Food Services (72)	1,305	9.3%
Retail Trade (44-45)	1,129	8.0%

Table 4 reveals that smaller housing options dominate the study area, with 1- and 2-person households making up nearly three-quarters of all occupied units.[66] Larger households are less common, with those of five or more people being rare. The housing stock is also overwhelmingly renter-occupied, with renters outnumbering owners across all home-size categories, especially among smaller households. This trend is typical for dense neighborhoods with students and young professionals.[67]

Table 4. Occupied Housing Units by Size and Home Ownership in Madison Study Area, Census 2020.
Source: Esri Business Analyst, Housing Profile, 2025.

Home Size	Occupied Units (2020)	Owner-Occupied Units	Percent of Total Occupied Units
Total	9,560	3,645	38.1%
1-Person	4,439	1,257	34.5%
2-Person	3,316	1,435	39.4%
3-Person	962	469	12.9%
4-Person	565	352	9.7%
5-Person	191	93	2.5%
6-Person	54	23	0.6%
7-Person	31	14	0.4%

[66] Esri, *Housing Profile* (Environmental Systems Research Institute, 2025).
[67] Constance Uyttebrouck et al., "Shared Housing for Students and Young Professionals: Evolution of a Market in Need of Regulation," *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 35, no. 4 (2020): 1017–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-020-09778-w.

Transportation, Anchors, and Amenities

East Washington Avenue benefits from multiple stations along Madison's Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) A and B lines, strengthening the corridor's regional connectivity; see Appendix H. Additional bus lines that run parallel to East Washington Avenue include the D and 28 lines and the C and 38 lines.

Key anchor institutions in or around the study area include the University of Wisconsin-Madison, UW Health, Madison Area Technical College (MATC), Madison Gas and Electric, and Dane County Regional Airport; see Figure 13. StartingBlock Madison is a strong entrepreneurial anchor, housing Madworks Accelerator, venture programs, and numerous early-stage tech firms.[68] Other potential institutions include Google and American Family Insurance.

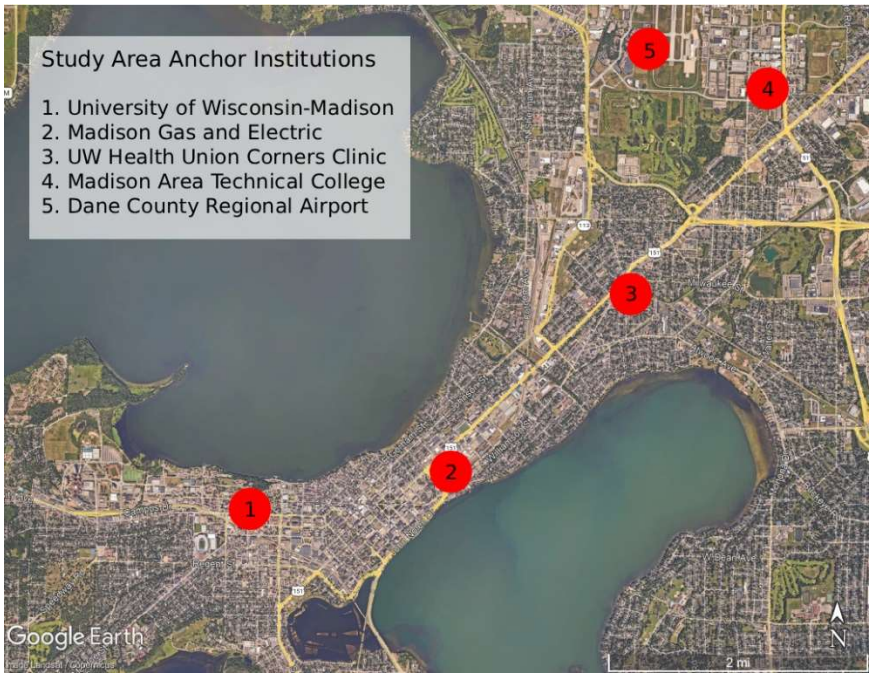


Figure 13. Madison Study Area Anchor Institutions Map

Looking toward the Wisconsin State Capitol and the Capitol Square, the area is surrounded by major cultural and civic anchors, including the Overture Center for the Arts, the Orpheum Theater, the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, the Madison Children's Museum, and the upcoming Wisconsin History Center. Other downtown cultural institutions along the corridor include the High Noon Saloon, The Sylvee, Madison Youth Arts (MYArts), and Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestra Center for Music (WYSO).

The city has a broad network of public and private institutions that can serve as partners in supporting an innovation district, including the State of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, and Epic Systems. Additional nonprofit partners could include University Research Park, the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Madison, Inc., Sustain Dane, Common Wealth Development, Inc., and Access to Independence.

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[68] "Madworks," StartingBlock, accessed April 9, 2026, https://www.startingblockmadison.org/core-programming/madworks.

Zoning and Land Use

The study area is primarily zoned as Parks and Recreation (PR) District and Traditional Residential Consistent-4 (TR-C4) District; see Appendix I.[69] Madison's PR districts aim to support active recreation, including golf courses, stadiums, pools, community centers, and large recreational facilities, as well as passive recreation in natural areas preserved for quiet enjoyment.[70] TR-C districts aim to preserve historic residential character, ensure context-sensitive new construction, protect existing housing, manage housing relationships and placement, and align development with city plans.[71] TR-C4 is the most flexible of the district categories, permitting a wider range of housing types and dimensional standards that allow for higher-density housing.[72] There are also three design districts (UDDs) within the study area, two of which are along East Washington Avenue.[73] The city is currently undertaking a multi-year effort to revise the Urban Design Code, which governs design review across the city's eight districts.

Madison's Generalized Future Land Use (GFLU) map (Appendix J) shows that the study area is primarily composed of Parks and Open Space uses, including parks, recreational facilities, conservation areas, stormwater management facilities, cemeteries, and other open space; Low Residential, which permits predominantly single-family and two-unit housing types; and Employment uses, which are predominantly office, research and development, medical, and specialized employment, with some low-impact manufacturing.[74]

Key Takeaways

- East Washington Avenue and the surrounding corridor provide centrally located, transit-accessible sites that align with the city's plans for high-intensity development.
- The study area's predominantly renter-occupied, small-household housing stock supports the mobility and flexibility that innovation-district workforces require.
- Proximity to the Capitol Square and major cultural institutions enhances residents' quality of life and the area's ability to attract talent and visitors.
- Some areas feature flexible residential zoning and employment-oriented land uses that support mixed-use, higher-density development.

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[69] "City of Madison Zoning Districts," City of Madison, ArcGIS, accessed April 17, 2026, https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=89737c066cda41eea5d986dd71291576.
[70] Madison General Ordinances § 28.095 – Parks and Recreation District, 28.095 Madison, Wis., Code of Ordinances, https://library.municode.com/wi/madison/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COORMAWIVOIICH20--31_CH28ZOCOOR_SUBCHAPTER_28GSPDI_28.095PAREDI.
[71] Madison General Ordinances § 28.041 – Traditional Residential - Consistent Districts, 28.041 Madison, Wis., Code of Ordinances, https://library.municode.com/wi/madison/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COORMAWIVOIICH20--31_CH28ZOCOOR_SUBCHAPTER_28CREDI_28.041TRREONDI.
[72] Madison General Ordinances § 28.045 – TR-C4 District, 28.045 Madison, Wis., Code of Ordinances, https://library.municode.com/wi/madison/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COORMAWIVOIICH20--31_CH28ZOCOOR_SUBCHAPTER_28CREDI_28.0454DI.
[73] "Urban Design Code Update Project," City of Madison, February 18, 2026, https://www.cityofmadison.com/dpced/planning/plans-projects/special-projects/urban-design-code-update.
[74] "Generalized Future Land Use (GFLU)," ArcGIS, accessed April 6, 2026, https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/6fd492cc03154200a3cf61e057c7526a.

Recommendations

Based on the common themes and strategies, I propose ten recommendations to help facilitate the formal creation of an innovation district along the East Washington Ave corridor. I also consider the pros and cons of the recommendations and how they may influence the area's development and long-term viability.

Table 5. Madison Study Area Recommendations.

Strong Anchor Institutions	• Coordinate key partnerships with major employers and research institutions to guide shared investment and district governance • Engage a diverse mix of institutions and local stakeholders to strengthen equitable governance, economic resilience, and shared accountability
Proximity to Research-Oriented Actors	• Implement joint research programs and R&D partnerships to formally connect UW–Madison and MATC with district-based firms • Expand workforce development pathways for emerging industries
Adaptive Reuse	• Encourage adaptive reuse to support sustainable revitalization, maintain affordability, and create flexible mixed-use spaces • Prioritize investment and redevelopment in underutilized industrial and commercial buildings suitable for adaptive reuse
Public-Sector Support	• Establish a formal governance structure to coordinate district development and ensure alignment with the city's long-term planning goals • Use financial incentives and other policy tools to reduce development risk and attract investment (e.g., WEDC programs, TIF, federal grants)
Mixed-Use and Accessible	• Promote additional mixed-use zoning to enable high-density transit-oriented development in areas adjacent to East Washington Avenue • Develop plazas, parks, and other public spaces to support community iteration and encourage informal collaboration

Recommendation Pros and Cons

Table 6. Madison Study Area Recommendations Pros and Cons.

Strong Anchor Institutions	• Gives all stakeholders a seat at the table to guide district growth • Reinforces long-term resilience and encourages early investment • Builds momentum and helps attract potential partners	• Risks an over-reliance on a small number of institutions • Incentives may reduce public revenue and disproportionately benefit institutions rather than surrounding communities • Programming may require significant upfront investment
Proximity to Research-Oriented Actors	• Attracts firms seeking proximity to research and student talent • Creates opportunities for students to engage with employers and enhances talent pipelines • Helps retain graduates in the region and strengthens Madison's competitiveness in emerging sectors	• Requires long-term coordination across institutions with different agendas • Risks duplicating existing workforce development initiatives • Formal programming and initiatives may require stable, long-term funding streams
Adaptive Reuse	• Preserves historic character and culturally significant buildings • Lowers development costs and can be quicker than new construction • Supports incremental, community-scaled development	• Outdated infrastructure may need extensive and costly repairs to meet modern standards • Often involves complex financing mechanisms • Requires robust design and preservation standards • Efforts can limit opportunities for higher-density development
Public-Sector Support	• Provides clear leadership and accountability while streamlining decision-making • Attracts private capital to underutilized areas • Aligns with regional and local development priorities	• Risks limited community representation • Requires strict oversight to ensure equitable outcomes • TIF districts can divert revenue from other public services
Mixed-Use and Accessible	• Creates a vibrant community that enhances quality of life and placemaking • Supports local spending and fosters diverse economic activity • Strengthens social cohesion and community identity	• Risks incompatible uses that can negatively affect residential areas • Public spaces may face safety, activation, or maintenance challenges • Open spaces reduce already limited developable land

Limitations

The analysis was subject to several limitations. The case studies examined represent districts at different stages of maturity, which affects the comparability of their layout and governance structures. Data availability also varied across districts, particularly regarding district history, GIS maps, and boundary definitions, resulting in uneven levels of detail. Because the assessment relies solely on publicly available information, it does not incorporate proprietary financial, market, or real estate data that could provide deeper insight into investment dynamics or performance. Finally, Madison is still evolving as post-pandemic development patterns continue to shift, so some findings may change as new projects, policies, and market trends emerge.

Conclusion

This document serves as a preliminary analysis to guide the City of Madison's consideration of a formal innovation district initiative. It outlines the structural, governance, and partnership elements required for innovation-oriented growth and identifies the conditions that must be in place before a district can be established. As a precursor, this report also highlights the spatial and economic analyses that Madison should complete to ensure that future planning aligns with long-term community and economic-development goals.

A formal designation of an innovation district provides the structural foundation necessary for sustained, coordinated growth. By defining clear geographic boundaries, the city signals where innovation-oriented investment, infrastructure improvements, and development incentives can be focused. Establishing a formal governance structure creates shared responsibility among anchors, public agencies, private partners, and community leaders while ensuring accountable, community-aligned development that improves quality of life and strengthens neighborhood stability. This transforms an innovation district from an idea into a structured, accountable, and community-aligned initiative. A formal governance structure also requires strong institutional partnerships and coordinated state- and local-level support. A collaborative effort between UW-Madison, UW Health, StartingBlock, and other regional innovation actors would provide the institutional foundation needed for long-term development. Alignment with state incentive programs, such as WEDC's Ignite Wisconsin Grants to support regional consortia, would further strengthen a district's economic base.[75]

Looking ahead, the Near East Area Plan supports a mixed-use, transit-oriented innovation district along East Washington Avenue. The plan's emphasis on concentrating higher-intensity growth near major transit corridors and key activity centers positions this area as a strong candidate for innovation-oriented investment. Additionally, the city's ongoing update of the urban design code offers an opportunity to embed goals and guidelines aligned with a potential innovation district. This includes broadening design standards and reducing regulations to better support mixed-use, walkable environments. These elements position the corridor to support a resilient innovation district that advances economic growth, supports emerging industries, and reinforces Madison's role as a regional hub for research and innovation.

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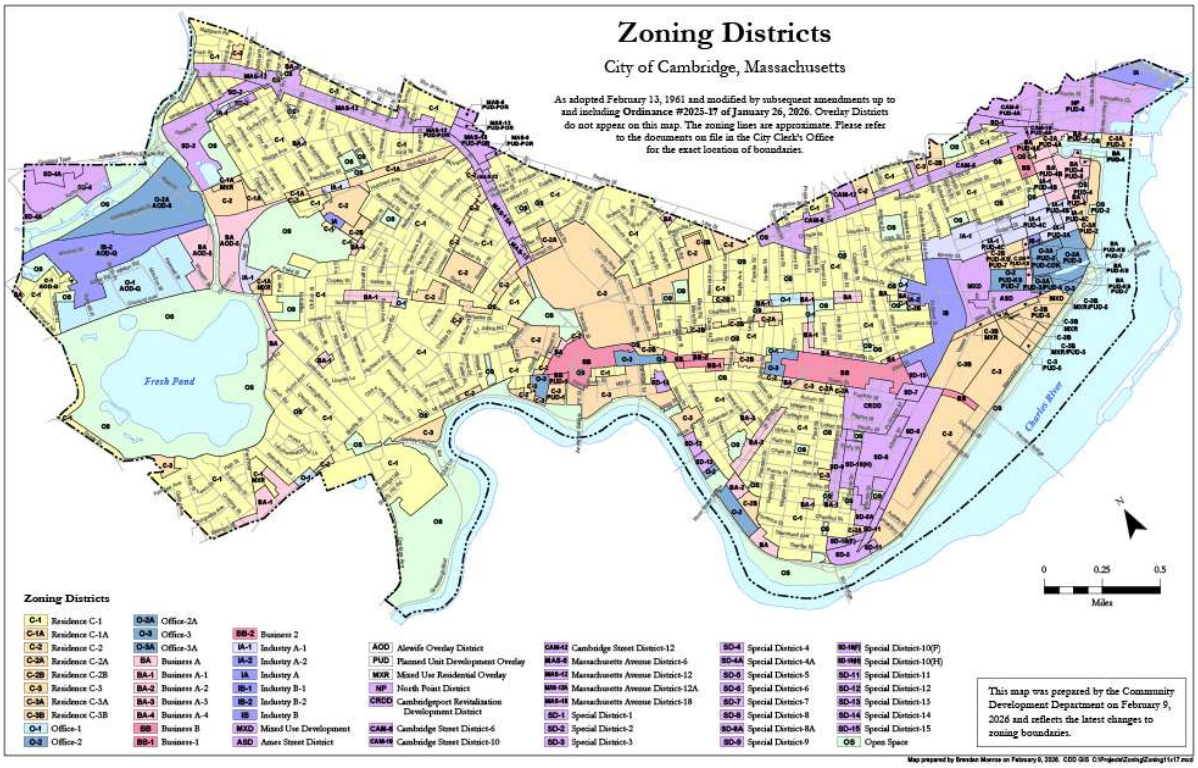
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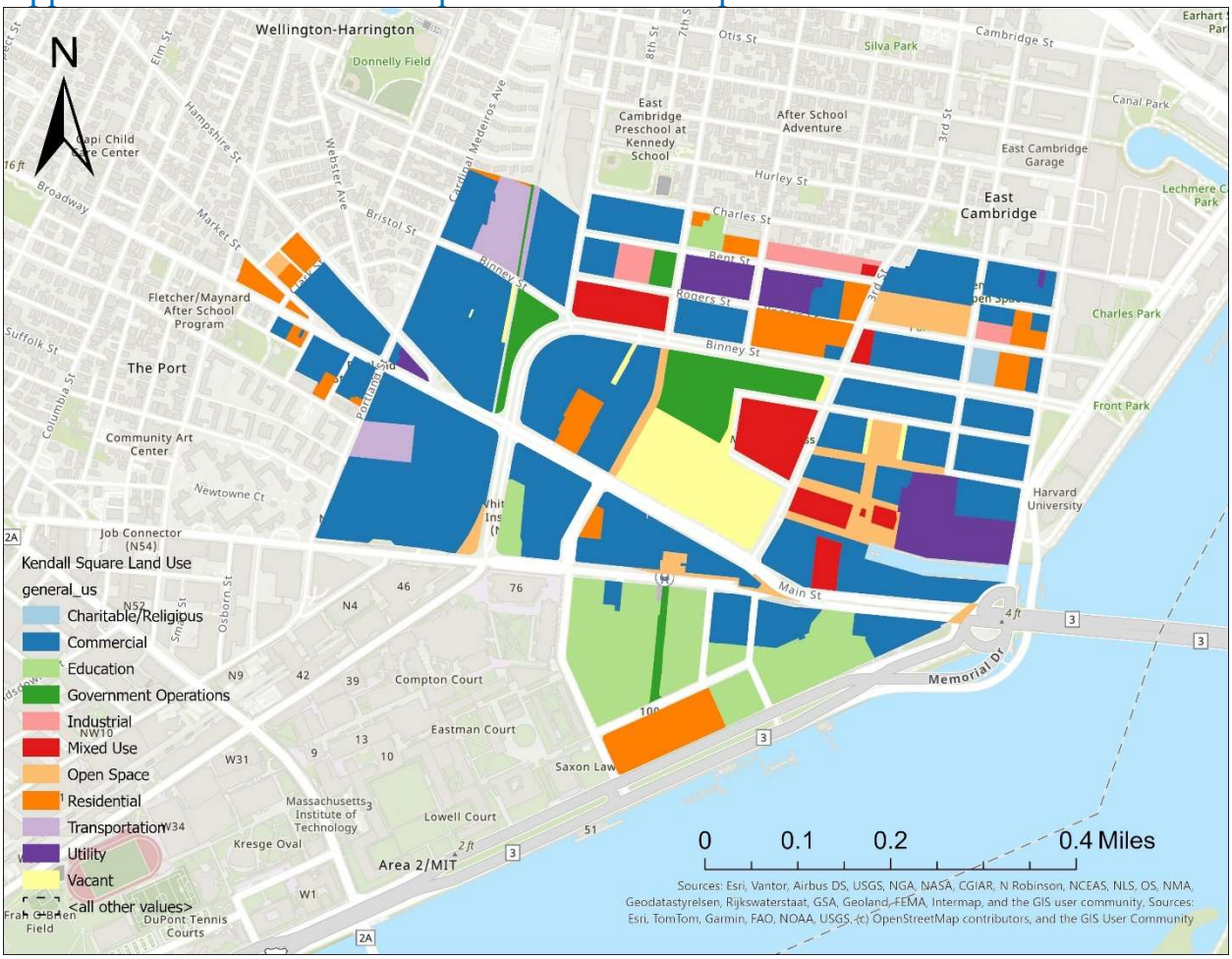
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Appendices

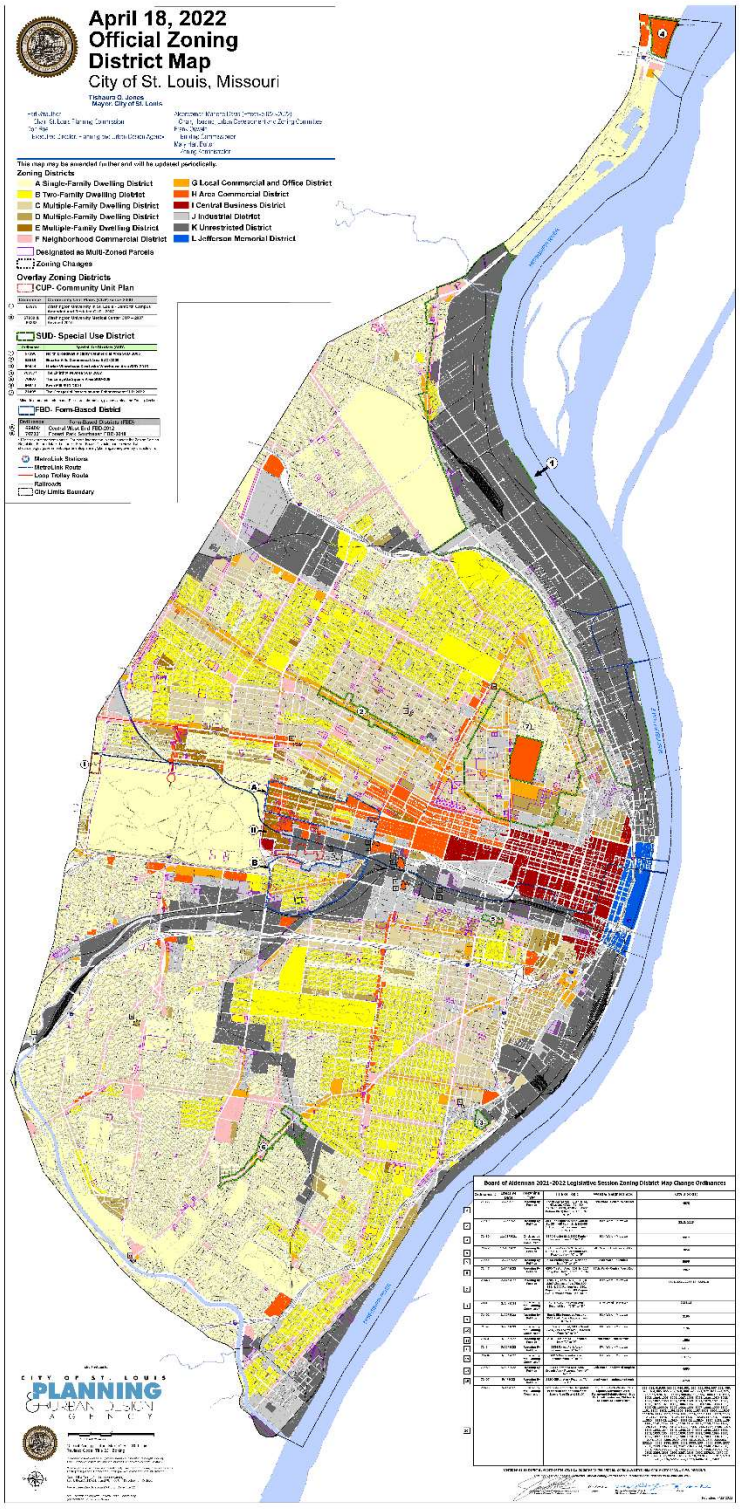
Appendix A: 2026 Cambridge Zoning Districts Map



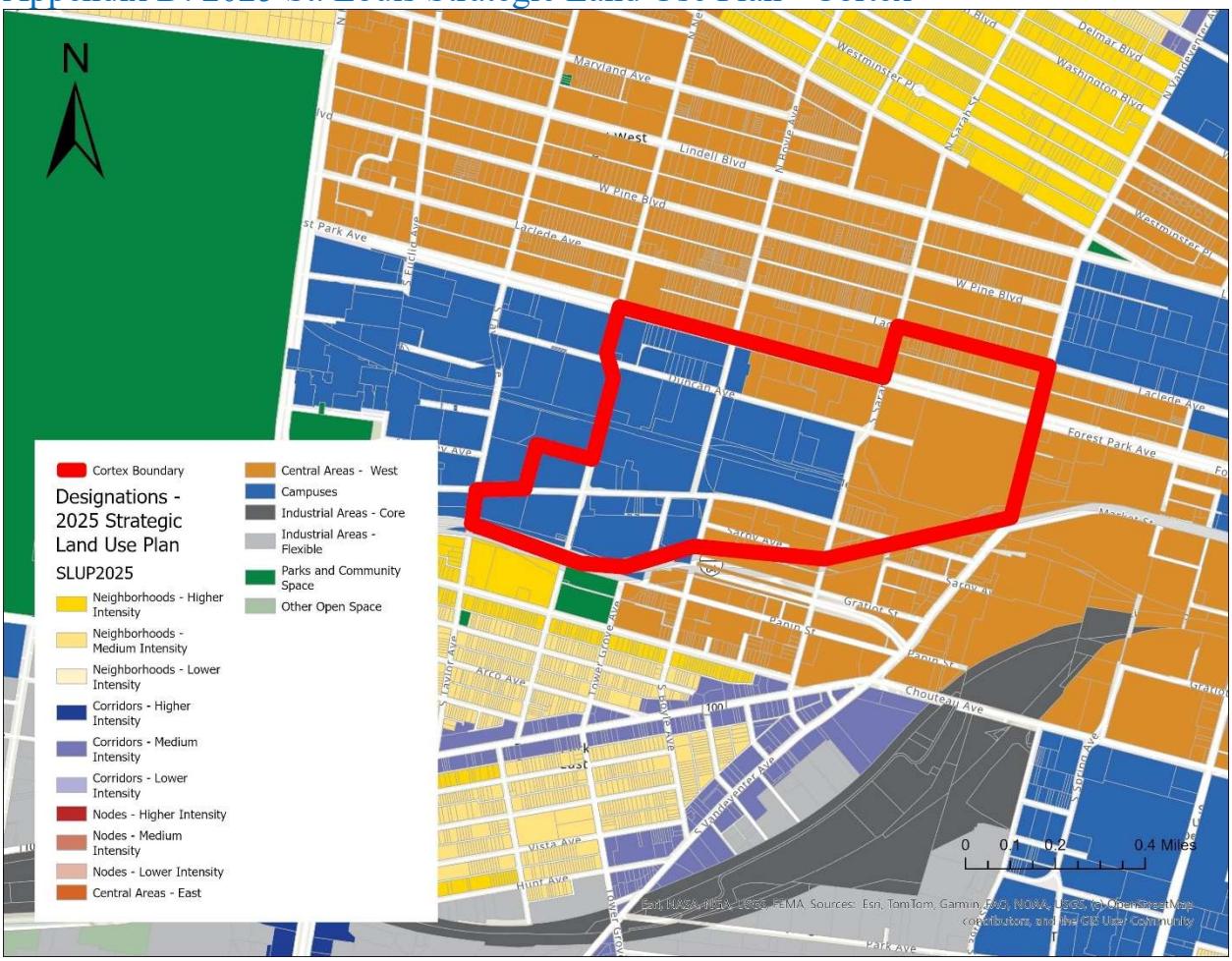
Appendix B: 2026 Kendall Square Land Use Map



Appendix C: 2022 St. Louis Zoning District Map



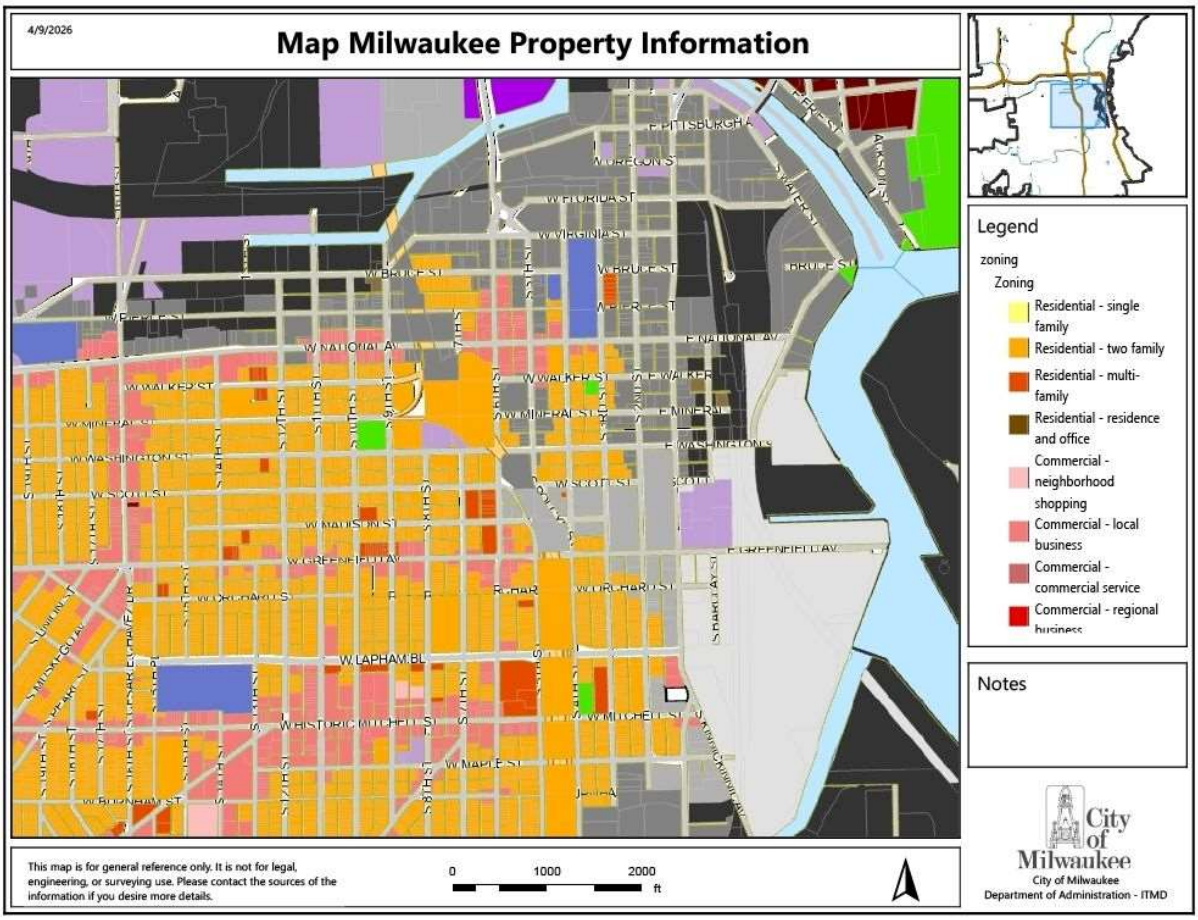
Appendix D: 2025 St. Louis Strategic Land Use Plan - Cortex



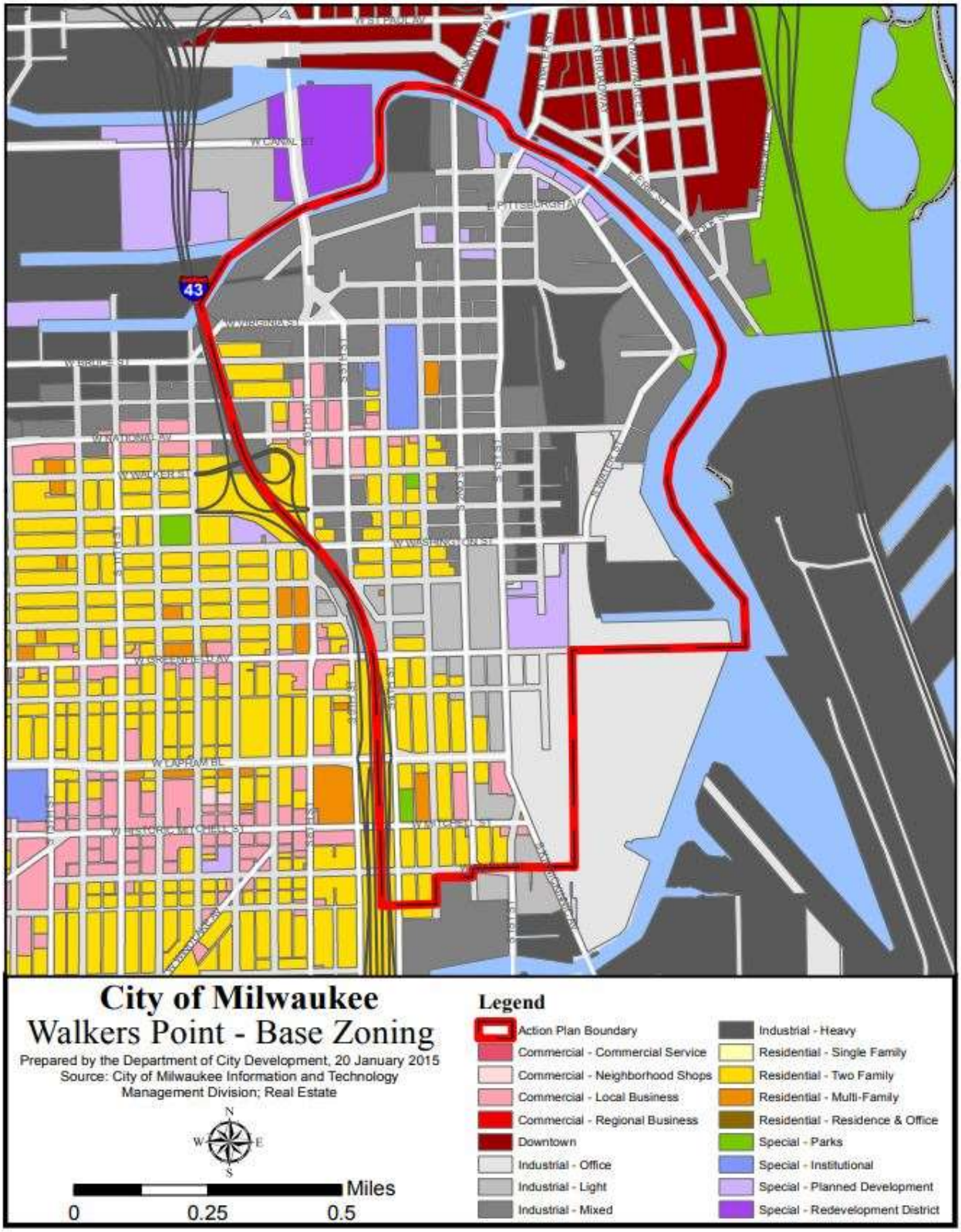
Appendix E: 2026 Milwaukee County Transit Route Map



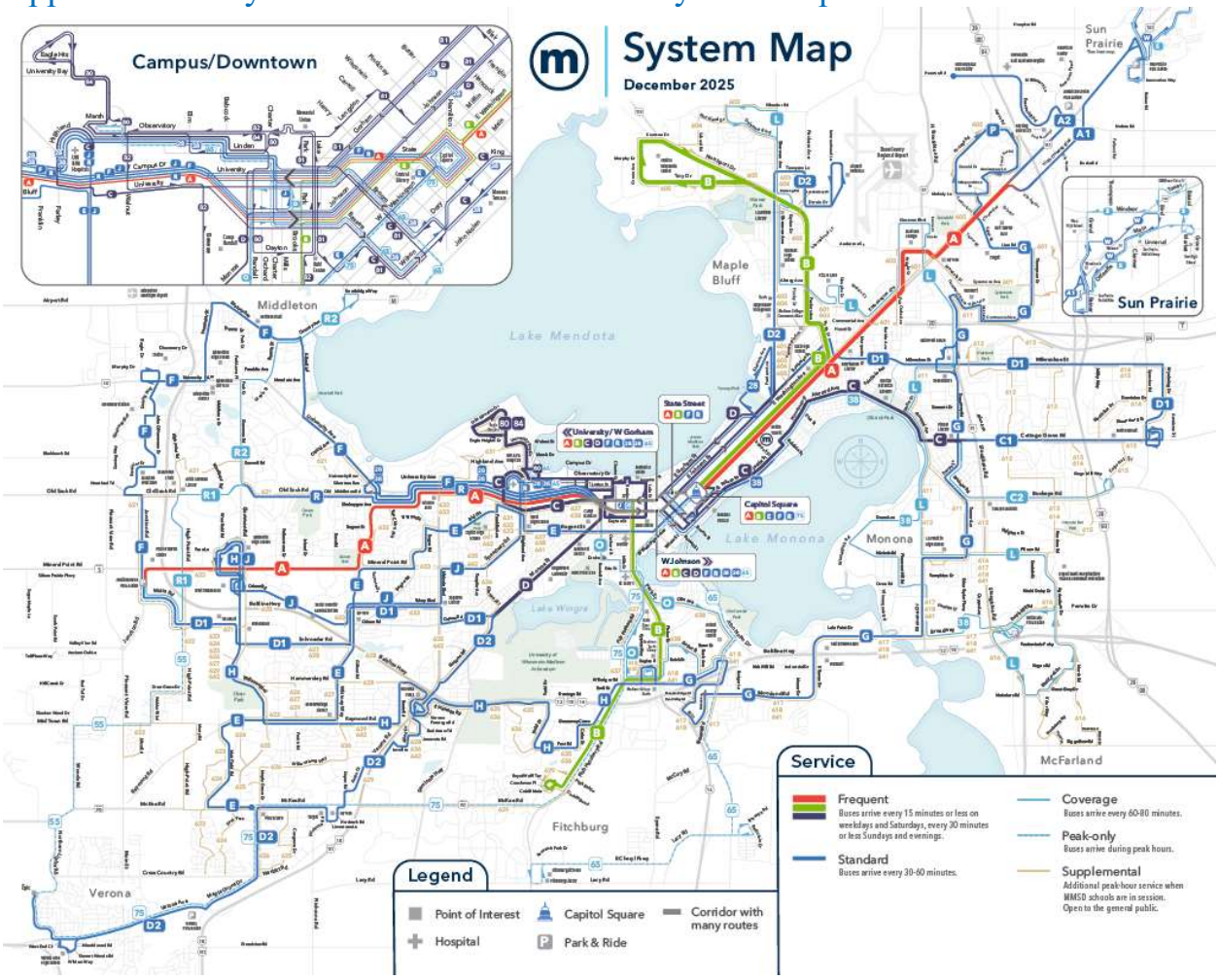
Appendix F: Milwaukee Zoning Map



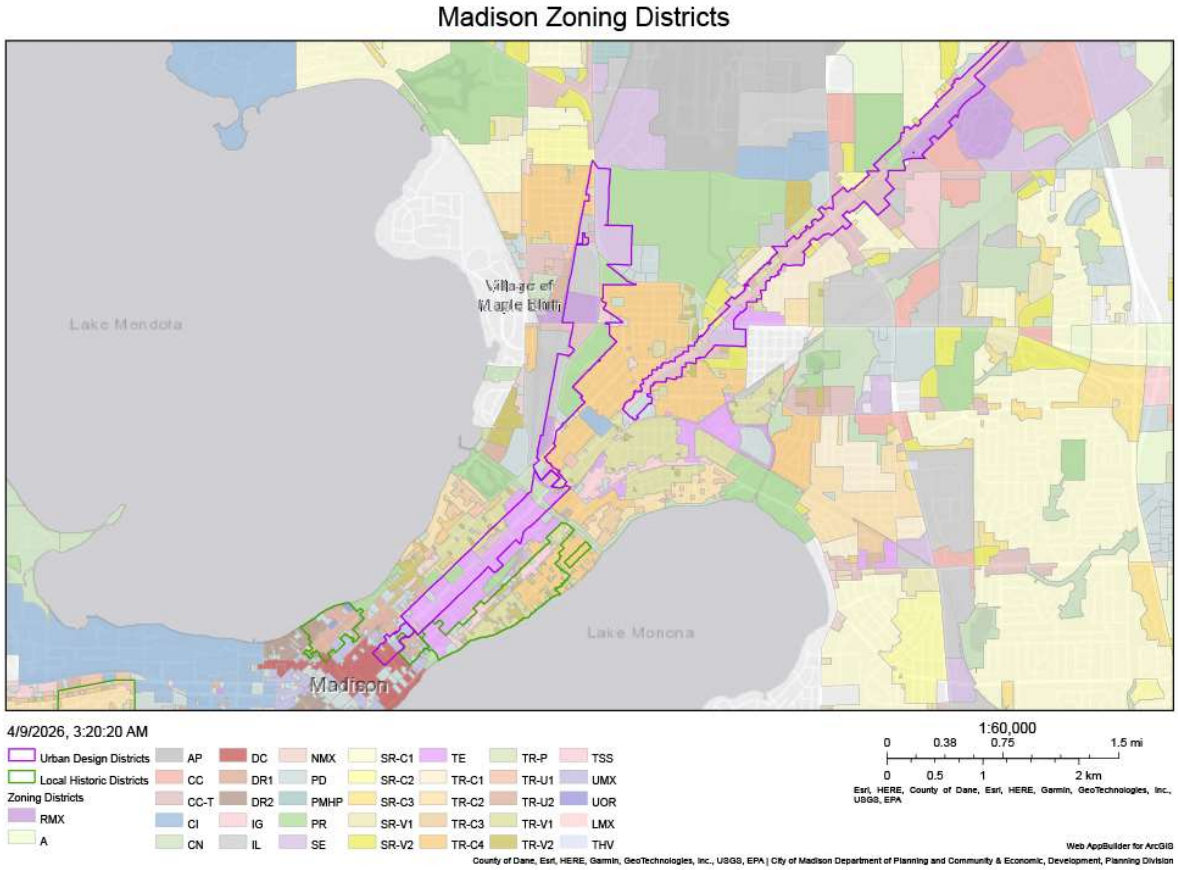
Appendix G: 2015 Walker's Point Strategic Action Plan Land Use Map



Appendix H: City of Madison Metro Transit System Map



Appendix I: Madison Zoning Districts



Appendix J: Madison Generalized Future Land Use (GFLU) Map

