

# CARIBOU DOWNTOWN DISTRICT PLAN



Prepared for the City of Caribou

By Kent Associates Planning & Design and Wright-Pierce Engineers  
In association with Eaton Peabody Consulting Group

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# I EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Caribou Downtown District Plan establishes a set of recommendations for public improvements for the Downtown District, as defined by the Downtown TIF District boundaries. These recommendations are based on an assessment of the downtown revitalization needs and opportunities, and establish priorities for public investment within the District (also establishing qualified costs for the TIF District).

The components of the Downtown Plan include public streetscape improvements, pedestrian safety and amenities, roadway improvements, downtown gateways, signage/wayfinding, downtown promotion and economic development, public-private opportunities including a façade improvement program, and the further development and expansion of the Downtown TIF program.

Several issues to be addressed in the Plan were identified in this process. Establishing a program for public improvements and investments in the Downtown is essential. The priorities established in this Plan will help guide the City in moving implementation forward and in seeking and dedicating funding in the Downtown.

Among these public improvements, the need for road improvements, expanding streetscape improvements to unify the Downtown, and the need for a signage system for wayfinding (including gateways) were highlighted in the assessment. Roads in the Lyndon Square District and High Street in particular are in need of traffic and pedestrians improvements, and continue to be visually detracting to the Downtown. Until such time as bypass traffic separation is constructed, the municipality will continue to seek revenues to repair the roadways within the Downtown District. Streetscape improvements from sidewalks, to lighting, to benches and other amenities should be extended beyond Lyndon Square to High Street, Bennett Drive, and other areas within the District, to help unify the Downtown District visually, improve the pedestrian environment, and promote economic development. Also, there is little in the way of signage to adequately address wayfinding within the Downtown; adding signage of a consistent design at gateways and other key locations would greatly improve visitors' ability to find their way to key destinations and services. Other important issues touched upon in this Plan include the incorporation of the 2004 Caribou Recreational Trails Plan recommendations for the Downtown area, the Goals and Strategies for the Downtown outlined within the 2004 Caribou Comprehensive Plan, and the need for marketing, promotion and economic development planning for the Downtown.

Finally, the need to expand the Downtown TIF District has arisen from this process, as it is recognized that opportunities such as the riverfront, South Main Street, and the Light Industrial Park are all important to tie into Downtown planning and improvements.

The improvements identified as "qualified costs" for the Downtown TIF District Program are prioritized according to significant Committee and public input throughout the process, and estimated costs are associated with each component. In addition to the TIF revenues generated from the Program, it is imperative that the City pursue grant funding opportunities to accomplish these tasks in a timely manner. Plan implementation will be accomplished through City administration working with business owners and partners at the local, state and federal levels, and will in turn spur revitalization and new growth for the City in the years ahead.

# II INTRODUCTION

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## I. PURPOSE, PLAN GOALS

Caribou has made great strides in investing in its Downtown, engaging in practical planning and seeing actions through to implementation. Following the 2000 Downtown Revitalization Plan (which was focused only on the Lyndon Square area), the 2003 Downtown Traffic Study, the 2004 Recreational Trails Plan, the 2004 Comprehensive Plan, and the establishment of the Downtown TIF District (2006), the City sought to update and expand the plan for the Downtown, in particular to tie it to the TIF district and program.

### **Plan Goals:**

1. Assess downtown revitalization needs & opportunities
2. Establish priorities for public investment & outline action strategies for revitalization
3. Establish a program & qualified costs for the Downtown TIF District

### **Plan Components:**

From initial discussions with City staff and the Downtown Revitalization Committee, the following elements were identified as components to be addressed in the Downtown Plan:

- TIF program development
- Public streetscape improvements (lighting, landscaping, amenities)
- Pedestrian safety, walkability, amenities
- Roadway improvements, parking
- Downtown gateways
- Signage/wayfinding
- Downtown promotion/economic development
- Public-private partnership opportunities

### **Basic Components of Downtown Revitalization**

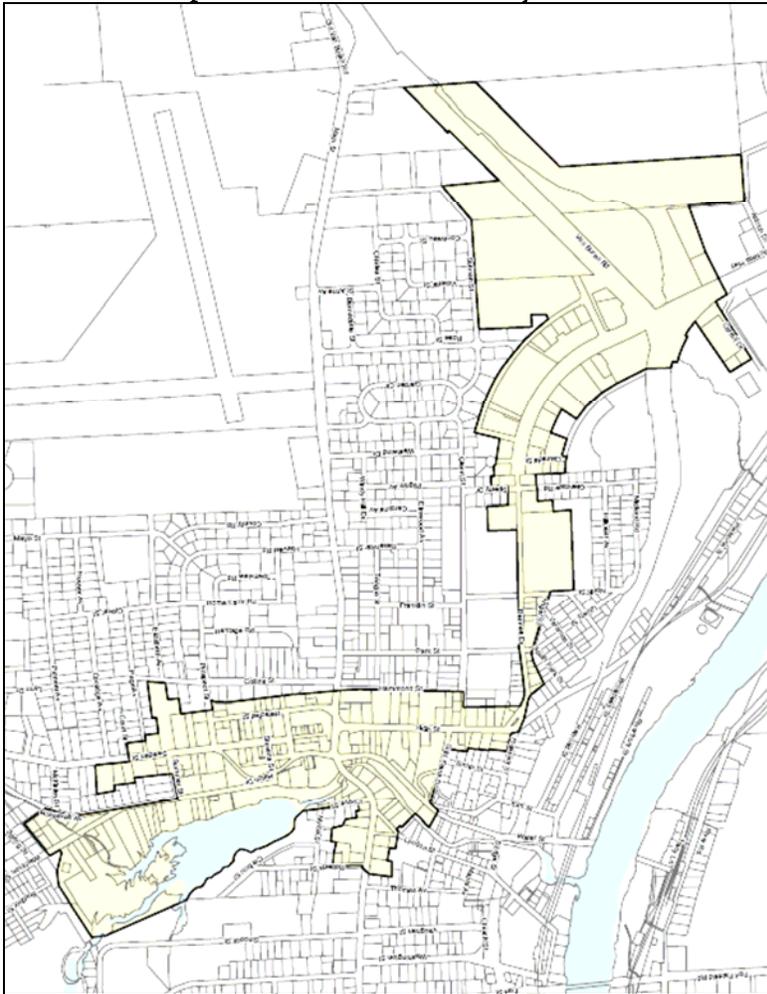
In any downtown planning process, it must be recognized that successful revitalization efforts must be built from four essential elements, as proven by the National Main Street program:

1. Design: a sound plan for physical improvements based on good design
2. Economic Development: a viable economic development program and strategies
3. Promotion: an aggressive marketing and promotion strategy, and creating a positive community image
4. Organization: the organization and “can-do” attitude to make it happen, including strong leadership and partnerships

This Plan primarily addresses the Design components of Caribou’s Downtown Development District. The remaining elements must be included in the City’s larger efforts to revitalize the Downtown.

## 2. STUDY AREA DESCRIPTION

TIF District map – Overall Downtown Study Area



The study area for this Plan is the Downtown TIF District, or Caribou Center, highlighted by the map to the left.

The TIF District is anchored by Lyndon Square, Sweden Street and High Street to the southwest, and by the Bennett Drive and Van Buren Road commercial area to the northeast.

Within this Plan, strategies are linked to particular sections or districts within the study area; these areas are described below.

A) Lyndon Square District



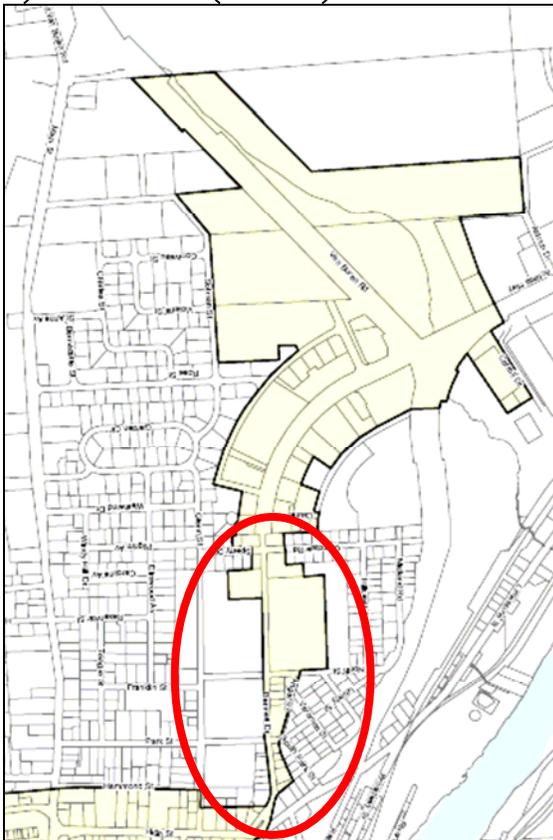
The Lyndon Square District includes the area around Sweden Street, Herschel Street, Hatch Drive, and Main Street, as well as part of Water Street. It is important to recognize the connections the Downtown has to the riverfront, High Street, and surrounding neighborhoods.

### B) High Street District



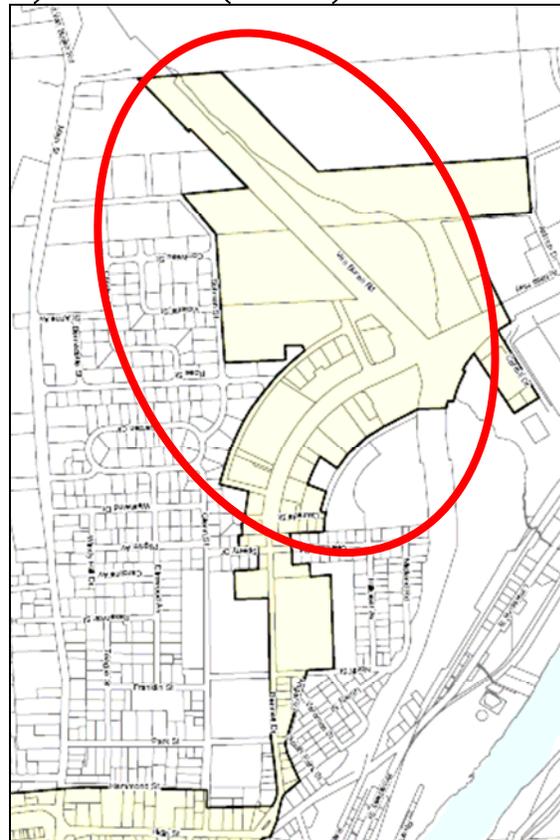
The High Street district is the connector between Lyndon Square and Bennett Drive and Route I. It serves as a center for community services as well as supporting mixed commercial and residential use.

### C) Bennett Drive (southern)



The southern segment of Bennett Drive is characterized by its community land uses (schools & recreation center) and two-lane traffic.

### D) Bennett Drive (northern) & Van Buren Road



The northern segment of Bennett Drive is characterized by larger-scale commercial/retail uses and four-lane traffic; Van Buren Road also has larger-scale commercial character (or opportunities).

### 3. ASSESSMENT

During the assessment phase of the project, the following are the main themes and issues that were highlighted:

#### I. Public investments

*“On top of the strong land use controls, the city has made a conscious effort to put most of its capital improvement funds into the designated growth areas. The City has received downtown revitalization funds [for the original study area], [received] funds to rebuild a wellness center in the downtown, [will be] seeking funds to connect the downtown with recreational trails in the rural areas, sought funds and constructed projects around Collins Pond for walking and bicyclists, and many other projects. The City has made a strong commitment to its downtown area and the surrounding residential neighborhoods.” (Caribou Comprehensive Plan)*

What are the most important improvements, programs, or initiatives for the City to invest in, for the success of the Downtown? This plan specifically looks at public improvements within the Downtown TIF District, as a means to establish priorities for future funds generated by the TIF District, as well as to provide a solid basis for additional state and federal grant opportunities. (The TIF program is described further in Section III.)

#### 2. Road improvements (Lyndon Square District, High Street), including pedestrian infrastructure & safety

The need for road improvements in the Lyndon Square District and High Street, particularly those already proposed but not funded by MDOT, was identified early on as a priority for the Downtown. These deteriorating roadways are both a growing traffic safety concern and visually detracting to the downtown. Many of the improvements proposed for the Lyndon Square area and High Street not only address traffic safety and efficiency but also address pedestrian safety through design. Maintaining Caribou’s walkability and accessibility is important to the community, and continued maintenance and enhancement of sidewalks and crosswalks is critical.

Also, the impact of the proposed bypass on traffic (regular vehicle) to the Downtown remains unknown; a study of the impacts and the need for signage for the bypass directing vehicles to the Downtown is recommended.

#### 3. Streetscape improvements

The already implemented streetscape improvements (lighting, sidewalks, tree planting, and other amenities) in the Downtown have greatly improved the look of the Downtown, and these types of enhancements are needed throughout the Downtown District to help visually unify Caribou’s community and commercial center. In addition, it is noted that trash receptacles and benches have been identified as a need throughout the District.

#### 4. Wayfinding & Signage

Many recognize the challenge that Caribou's Downtown traffic circulation poses to visitors; while route numbers are generally well marked, common-themed signage to help "find your way" to key destinations and services in the Downtown is needed.

#### 5. Bennett Drive & Van Buren Road opportunities

The southern section of Bennett Drive could be better tied to the rest of the Downtown through the extension of streetscape elements such as proposed on High Street. There may also be support for some streetscape and/or landscaping improvements to the commercial/retail area along Bennett Drive (northern section) and Van Buren Road.

#### 6. Other Downtown opportunities

Other opportunities and needs raised in this process include: expanding the TIF District to include more areas adjacent to the Downtown in need of public improvements; pursuing opportunities for the redevelopment and/or conservation of Caribou's riverfront (in the area at the end of Water Street, east of the Downtown); and implementing the proposed trail connections in the Downtown District.

# III PRIORITY ACTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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## 5. SUMMARY OF PRIORITIES

The following action recommendations summarize the priority improvements for the Downtown District. These recommendations are illustrated and described in more detail in Section IV. Additional strategies and recommendations for the Downtown District (lower priority) are also discussed in Section IV.

- ◆ Add **gateway signs** at key entrance points to the Downtown and its districts; coordinate gateway signs with proposed wayfinding signage.

*Gateway signs should be located at each of the major entrances to the Downtown and its districts. The gateway signs should also be designed to provide directional information as part of the Downtown's wayfinding system (see next).*

- ◆ Establish a **wayfinding signage system** for traffic in the Downtown to guide visitors to key destinations.

*A system of signage directing visitors to the Downtown and to key destinations and services within the Downtown should be developed, with a unified design that will be recognizable and easy to read.*

*As part of the establishment of a wayfinding signage system, the different sections or districts of the Downtown, such as the Lyndon Square District, High Street District, Bennett Drive District, etc., could be adopted for more effective marketing and wayfinding.*

- ◆ Gain funding and implement proposed **road improvements** for the Downtown.

*Deferred road improvements of note include Sweden Street, Herschel Street, and intersection improvements around the Downtown, as well as High Street. MDOT should be pressed as to the priority and importance of these improvements to Caribou's downtown revitalization efforts. These road improvements are a critical infrastructure investment, key to the overall Downtown Revitalization effort. The implementation of proposed streetscape improvements should be coordinated with the implementation of downtown road improvements.*

- ◆ Make sidewalk, streetscape and landscaping improvements to **Herschel Street**.

*Improvements to Herschel Street should include sidewalk rehabilitation, crosswalk enhancements for pedestrian safety, street tree plantings or landscaping on the south side of the street, and improvements to the Legion and Herschel Street parking lots (including adequate curbing, striping and landscaping).*

- ◆ Work with building owners along **Herschel Street on building/façade improvements** or redevelopment opportunities.

*Buildings that face Herschel Street should be a priority for façade improvements through façade grants, or could be considered for redevelopment opportunities.*

- ◆ Implement proposed **traffic circulation** improvements in the Lyndon Square area, with priority for **Record Street**.

*The proposed traffic improvements for Record Street in particular (conversion to two-way traffic and associated intersection improvements) would greatly improve the accessibility of Sweden Street and many Lyndon Square businesses. Record Street improvements, as well as the other proposed Lyndon Square traffic improvements, are important to traffic and pedestrian safety, and the overall accessibility and “legibility” for the downtown.*

- ◆ **Extend Downtown streetscape elements** west along Sweden Street and east along Water Street.

*Streetscape elements such as the Downtown lampposts, tree planting, and rehabilitated sidewalks and crosswalks, should be extended west along Sweden Street (a gateway to the Downtown) between the courthouse and Prospect Street. Streetscape elements should also be extended east along Water Street, to the end of the main block of buildings.*

- ◆ Implement **trail connections** to the Downtown and Bennett Drive, as recommended in the 2004 Recreational Trails Plan and promote Downtown Caribou as a pedestrian-friendly and bike-friendly destination.

*The Caribou Recreational Trails Plan recommends adding a pedestrian trail connection from Lyndon Square to the riverfront along Water Street, as well as a multi-use trail connection to Bennett Drive businesses and the new Recreation Center. These connections are tied to ongoing recreational and economic development initiatives. Furthermore, improving bicycle routes and maintaining good pedestrian access between the Downtown and surrounding neighborhoods, parks, and schools is important for both the community and for tourism.*

- ◆ Make sidewalk, crosswalk, streetscape and landscaping improvements to **High Street**, in conjunction with the proposed roadway and access management improvements and needed infrastructure improvements.

*High Street is the key connector between Lyndon Square and Bennett Drive, and a hub for community and commercial activity. Adding streetscape elements such as Downtown-style lampposts, tree planting, and grass esplanades would greatly enhance this area and help unify it with the Downtown. These improvements should be made priority as part of the proposed road improvements and needed sewer and water infrastructure improvements.*

- ◆ Extend Downtown streetscape elements along **Bennett Drive**, particularly the southern segment (2 lanes), to the schools and Recreation Center.

*The southern segment of Bennett Drive, between High Street and the Recreation Center and schools (to Glendale Road), primarily consists of community uses, and should be unified with the*

*Downtown by adding streetscape elements such as lampposts, tree plantings, and possibly sidewalk upgrades.*

- ◆ Make **traffic calming and pedestrian improvements** on the northern segment (4 lanes) of Bennett Drive.

*The northern segment of Bennett Drive, between Glendale Road and Van Buren Road, is a wide expanse of road, and could be greatly enhanced (visually, and pedestrian safety at crossings) with the implementation of center islands or medians as well as streetscaping.*

- ◆ Expand and enhance **Downtown economic development** efforts, and invest in a marketing & economic development plan for the Downtown.

*The City should focus in on economic development for the Downtown by establishing a marketing strategy and economic development plan for the Downtown. This plan should provide guidance on the best approach for increasing marketing and promotion, as well as for proactive business retention and attraction programs for the Downtown.*

*Also, economic development in the Downtown District could be enhanced by expanding current programs to better represent and more actively promote the City's economic development interests in regards to the Downtown. The City's economic development program and resources should also be more closely tied to the Office of Community Development, Town Manager, and other City departments' programs and resources. The roles of City staff and the CCCI need to be clearly defined as economic development efforts are expanded and an economic development plan is established for the downtown.*

- ◆ Promote and establish Caribou as a **government service center**.

*Currently, several government entities have located in Caribou, and with the availability of office space and other factors it makes sense to adopt this economic development strategy. The City should continue to ensure that the infrastructure and services needed to support this are in place.*

- ◆ Expand the Downtown TIF District to include (generally):

- South Main Street
- Glenn Street
- The Light Industrial Park
- The Riverfront (at the mouth of Caribou Stream, Broadway Street area)

*These areas have been identified during this process for inclusion in the overall Downtown TIF District. Improvements recommended in this Plan, including streetscape, signage, trail connections, and other public investments should be an option for these additional areas tied to the Downtown and part of Caribou Center. Currently the Downtown TIF District extends as far as Roberts Street along South Main Street; the district should be extended to Fort Street or beyond so that this important gateway area to the Downtown can be included for future funding of public improvements and programs.*

# IV THE DOWNTOWN TIF PROGRAM

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The City of Caribou Downtown TIF was approved initially on March 30, 2006 and “re-approved” on March 26, 2007 based on additional information submitted to the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD).

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a funding mechanism and business development incentive established by the State of Maine that allows new property taxes generated by business investment/increases in valuation to be used to support the enhancement of public facilities and to support commercial growth and development projects. **This valuation “shelters” the Captured Assessed Value (CAV) and the municipality is protected from adverse adjustments to State subsidies and County taxes based upon the total valuation for the life of the TIF.** TIF’s are created and adopted by local legislative bodies and approved by DECD. TIF programs identify a defined geographic boundary (the ‘District’), a statement of objectives and public purpose (the ‘Development Program’) and a description of how TIF revenues will support the objectives (the ‘Financial Plan’). **These components are included and made a part of this District Plan.**

Earlier this decade the State acknowledged the importance of Maine’s community centers and the unique challenges facing Maine’s downtown revitalization efforts. They addressed these challenges by amending TIF statutes and establishing the Downtown TIF program. These downtown TIF districts are exempt from the usual statutory limits on TIF districts’ size and valuation, as well as local bonding constraints, which apply to ‘regular’ TIF’s.

The City of Caribou Downtown TIF was first established to support the redevelopment of a single commercial property; though a year later the TIF District was expanded to include a total of 267 acres in the City’s downtown. *The Caribou Downtown District Plan* is the result of a public process to update and expand the City’s 2000 *Downtown Revitalization Plan*, in large part to identify downtown revitalization needs and opportunities, assess the present structure of the TIF District, and establish a program of prioritized, qualified development activities and project costs for the Downtown TIF. These activities are detailed in Section V, ‘Phasing and Funding’, of this document, and are consistent with the eligible uses of TIF revenues as defined by statute.

Upon completion of this process, DECD is expecting to receive a copy of this approved or adopted Downtown District Plan to provide the basis of approved expenditures from the TIF project account.

After a careful review of the existing Downtown TIF District and the draft Revitalization Plan, the following recommendations are made regarding the existing City of Caribou Downtown TIF:

- ◆ Amend the Downtown TIF District boundaries to include the entirety of the area identified as part of the downtown within this Revitalization Plan.
- ◆ Amend the term of the Downtown TIF District from 15 years to 30 years.

Boundaries:

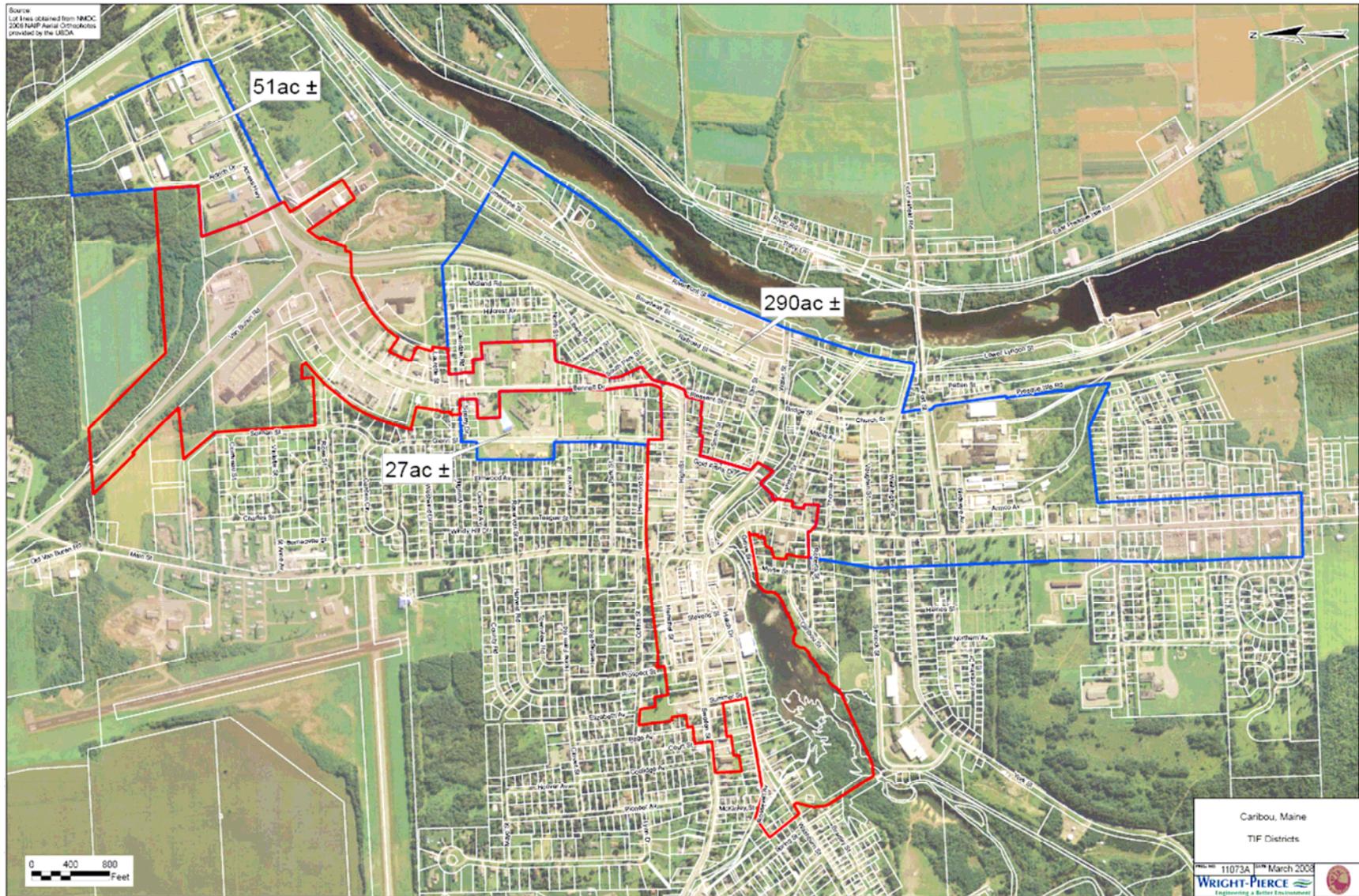
The value of the tax increment financing district lies largely in the ability to use sheltered revenues to fund projects that support economic development. The updated Caribou Downtown District Plan has identified several areas, such as the riverfront, **Fort Street area, Glenn Street area, the Light Industrial Park** and along South Main Street that were not included as part of the previous plan or Downtown TIF District designation. These are important areas of the City's downtown, and by including these areas within the District boundaries, the City can implement the Caribou Downtown District Plan using TIF revenues to finance any of the investments identified in the Plan. Including these additional areas will also capture, within the TIF, the tax revenue on increases valuation in these areas.

Term:

The Downtown TIF District is currently set up as a 15-year TIF. Due to the speculative nature of projecting new investment, a downtown TIF district typically approaches the limits of term allowed by statute. The projects outlined in the Caribou Downtown District Plan require expenditures by the City. By extending the term to thirty years, there is increased opportunity for the level of private investment to occur which will support the cost of the projects.

Implementing these recommendations will require a formal amendment process with a publicized Public Hearing, City Council vote, and application to DECD. An extension to the normal March I submittal deadline, which was recently granted to the City by DECD, will allow submittal of the City's proposed TIF amendment to be considered by the State, with approval expected prior to March 31, 2008.

# Proposed Expanded TIF District Boundaries



# V PLAN STRATEGIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Plan's priority actions and other (lower priority) recommendations are described and illustrated in this section. Actions that were listed as priority (Section II) are noted.

## 6. DOWNTOWN DISTRICT-WIDE STRATEGIES

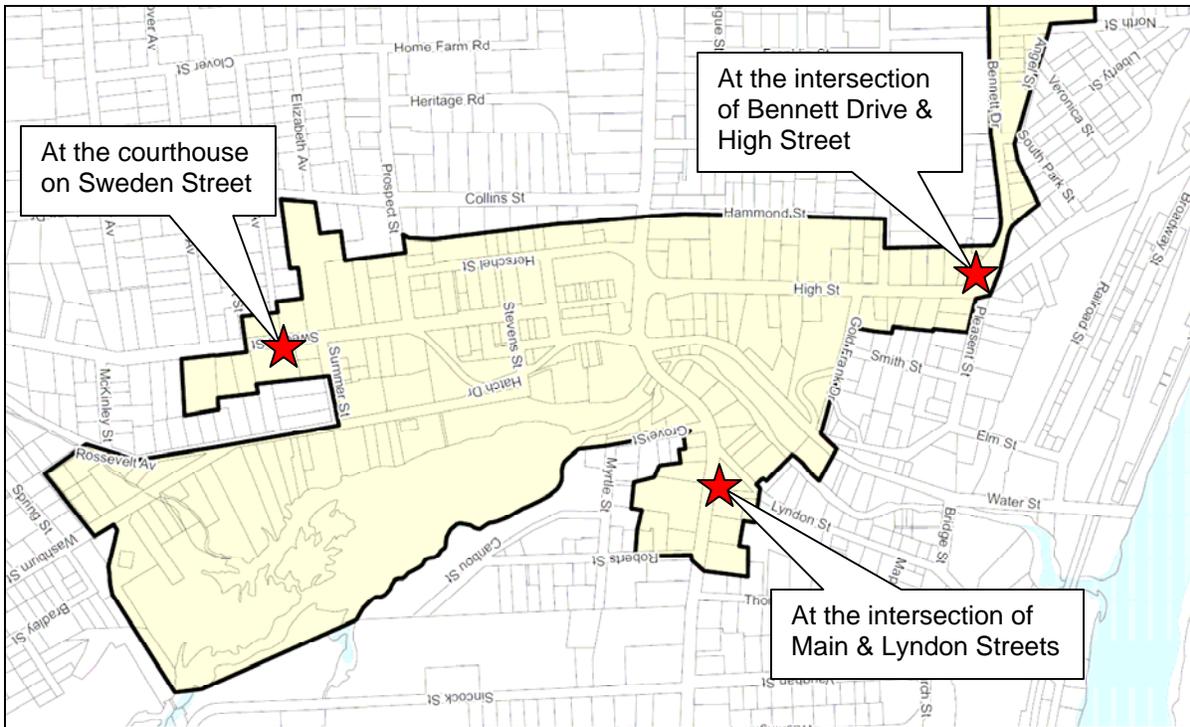
### Signage

- ◆ **Priority:** Add gateway signs at key entrance points to the Downtown and its districts; coordinate gateway signs with proposed wayfinding signage.

Gateway signs for the Downtown and the Downtown districts could be located at each of the major routes into the Downtown. The existing gateway sign (picture below), or a similarly designed sign, could be replicated to locate at each of the gateways. Other existing gateway signs on Routes I61, 89 and I should be replaced so that all are a consistent design. Gateway signage should also be coordinated with other wayfinding and directional signage (see next).



*A design style is already used in the existing signage (left); this same style can be used or modified for other gateway signs.*



*There are several good locations for gateway signs to the Downtown area, such as those shown above. Additional gateway sign locations, such as on Bennett Drive, could be included as well.*





- ◆ **Priority:** Establish a wayfinding signage system for traffic in the Downtown area to guide visitors to key destinations.

Wayfinding signs should be located at key ‘decision points’ for drivers, even in combination with gateway signs, and should highlight key destinations and City services. The signage must have a consistent, easily recognized design that is used throughout the Downtown. Wayfinding signage is especially important along Route 1 and the proposed bypass, as a way to help direct drivers in to the Downtown.



*A design style is already used in the existing signage (above left, above right); this style includes the use of the Caribou icon and consistent sign color and shape/outline.*



Private Improvements/Public-Private Partnership Opportunities

- ◆ Façade grant program expanded to be offered for buildings along Herschel Street, Water Street, Main Street, High Street and Bennett Drive

Buildings on High Street and Bennett Drive have been identified for the next round of façade grant opportunities, as façade grants and loans have been offered for the Downtown Mall and Sweden

Street. Consideration should be given for façade program funds to allow signage and landscaping improvements to be included.

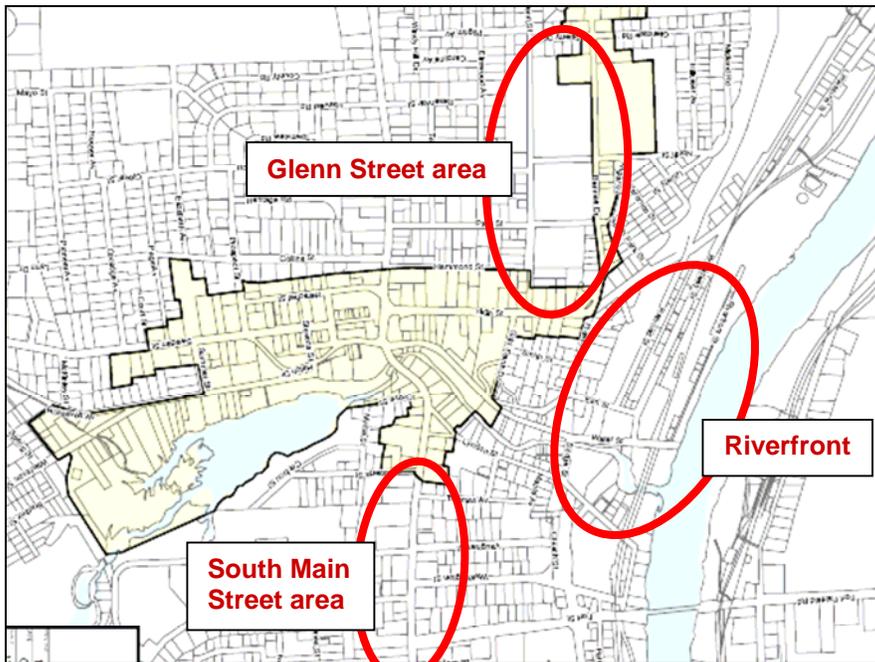
Redevelopment/Economic Development Initiatives

- ◆ **Priority:** Promote and establish Caribou as a government service center.

Currently, several government entities have located in Caribou, and with the availability of office space and other factors it makes sense to adopt this economic development strategy. The City should continue to ensure that the infrastructure and services needed to support this are in place.

- ◆ **Priority:** Expand the Downtown TIF District to include (generally):
  - South Main Street
  - Glenn Street
  - The Light Industrial Park
  - The Riverfront (at the mouth of Caribou Stream, Broadway Street area)

Improvements recommended in this Plan, including streetscape, signage, trail connections, and other public investments should be an option for these additional areas tied to the Downtown and part of Caribou Center. Currently the Downtown TIF District extends as far as Roberts Street along South Main Street; the district should be extended to Fort Street or beyond. The southern/lower section of Bennett Drive should be broadened to include Glenn Street and the schools, so that any improvements made tie them into the Recreation Center. The light industrial park and riverfront are both areas with development potential that are a good fit in the TIF district, benefiting from public investments and potentially generating funds. (See map on next page.)



*General locations for TIF District expansion*