

## Chapter 3 Existing Conditions: Issues and Opportunities

This chapter contains all the baseline information for the Plan including analysis of existing conditions related to the following areas:

- 1.0 Land Use and Zoning
- 2.0 West Route 66 Market Study
- 3.0 Demographic Study
- 4.0 Metropolitan Redevelopment Areas
- 5.0 Historic Route 66
- 6.0 Transportation
- 7.0 City Facilities and Services (Fire, Police, Libraries and Community Centers)
- 8.0 Water and Sewer
- 9.0 Drainage
- 10.0 Utilities
- 11.0 Parks, Trails and Open Space

## Existing Conditions: Land Use and Zoning, Segment One

### 1.0 Land Use Overview

The West Route 66 Sector Development Plan includes approximately 1,000 acres and six miles of Central Ave. The Plan area generally includes parcels north and south of Central Avenue between 106th Street and Rio Grande Boulevard, with the main exceptions at the intersections with Bridge Boulevard and Volcano Road where the boundary expands to follow those roads. West Central Avenue, formerly Route 66, has historic significance to area development, and is the western gateway to Albuquerque.

Development patterns along Central Ave. in the Plan area range from older, fine-grained development between Old Coors to Rio Grande Blvd., to vast areas of undeveloped land toward the western plan boundaries. New commercial development has recently sprung up adjacent to major intersections west of Old Coors Rd. in response to a housing boom on the Southwest Mesa in the last decade.

During the community participation process, specific issues and challenges related to existing land uses were raised, including: a predominance of auto repair, tire shops and other auto-related businesses located on the corridor, an emerging conflict between trucking uses and area commercial goals, and a lack of retail services that are easily accessible by multiple modes of transportation in the Plan area.

### 1.1 Segment One Land Use Analysis

Segment One includes parcels primarily fronting Central Ave. from the City limits at 106th street to Coors Boulevard. Lot sizes tend to be large (at least 4 acres) and deep (1,000 feet). With the exception of small lots fronting Central Ave. and Bridge St. between 98th and 86th St. Access to these deep lots is limited since they generally front on Volcano or Central Ave. only. Development on the western fringe of the City is sparse and consists of mobile homes, a dog kennel, a few fast food restaurants and vacant land. There is new commercial development at Central Ave. and 98th St. to serve the area's housing boom. Two neighborhood shopping centers, constructed within the past five years, are located on the north side of Central Ave. and offer neighborhood goods and services. There are some vacant spaces in these centers. Development continues to be sparse between 98th St. and Unser Boulevard, with large tracts of undeveloped land. Land uses in this stretch of Central Ave. consist primarily of mobile homes, self-storage, a campground and a few motels and miscellaneous businesses.

## Exiting Conditions: Land Use and Zoning, Segment One



Figure 6: Newer strip commercial at 98th



Figure 7: Unser Crossing

The intersection of Unser Blvd. and Central Ave. has seen recent development attention. Unser Crossing is an approximately 50 acre planned commercial center located on the southwest corner of Central Avenue and Unser Boulevard. In 2008, the developer obtained a zone change from SU-1 for C-2 (10 acres), O-1, and PRD 2-DU/acre to C-2. The applicant applied for and obtained a zone change because the SU-1 zoning established by the former West Route 66 Sector Development Plan limited the commercial on the entire 50 acre site to 24 acres of commercial. The site development plan for Unser Crossing includes two large anchor retail facilities, a health club and several smaller retail shops. The infrastructure for the center, including internal roads, curb and gutter, storm drains, sidewalks and lighting, has been built. However the center is largely vacant; only a CVS Pharmacy has been built.

As noted in the market analysis performed for this Plan, it is likely that once the effects of the national housing crisis subside and funding for commercial development becomes more accessible, this center will be one of the first in the area to develop.

On the north west corner of Unser and Central, the City has begun development of a 13 acre tract, which is home to a transit park and ride facility. The remainder of the property is undeveloped. City plans for the rest of the site include a library and commercial development that meets the requirements. Northeast of the park



Figure 8: Transit park and ride site

and ride, on a separate lot, is the recently opened University of New Mexico health clinic. As a testament to the need for health care services on Albuquerque's West Side, the clinic was at capacity and no longer accepting new patients soon after opening.

From Unser Boulevard to Coors Boulevard, development is again sparse and limited to mobile home parks, storage facilities, a large church campus, the Verizon call center, a small range of auto related shops and services and large parcels of vacant

land. The development at the intersection of Coors Blvd. and Central Ave. provides goods and services for nearby residential areas with two supermarkets, and several banks and fast food restaurants. These shopping facilities provide the only opportunities for the purchase of daily goods and services within a 1.5 mile area.

Summary of large parcel land use in Segment 1 (over 5 acres)

- Shopping centers at 98th and Central (north side)
- Unser Crossing shopping center (pad ready, one pad developed)
- Legacy Church site
- Shopping centers at Coors and Central

### 1.2 Segment One Zoning Analysis

Prior to the adoption of the 1987 West Route 66 Sector Development Plan, the zoning for Segment One along Central Avenue included residential, commercial, industrial and mobile home. The zoning on these lots changed parcel by parcel, creating a discontinuous land use pattern. At the time of the adoption of the 1987 plan, zone changes had been granted in this area for C-2 zoning. The 1987 plan removed mobile home and residential zoning from the properties fronting Central Ave., replacing it with IP and C-2, reflecting several zone change requests.

In 2009, an amendment to the 1987 plan was adopted, creating two new optional zoning designations, Community Activity Center and Neighborhood Activity Center, to “concentrate moderate density mixed land use and social and economic activities to reduce urban sprawl, auto travel needs, and service costs and enhance the identity of Albuquerque and the southwest Albuquerque Community.” The new zones encourage mixed land use, create minimum density requirements, and established site requirements for areas designated Community or Neighborhood Activity Centers within the plan boundary by the Comprehensive Plan.

Since 2000, several zone change requests have been made to either add commercial uses to the IP zone or to change zoning from IP to C-2, whereas only one request was made to change a C-2 zone to an IP zone to accommodate a warehouse and an office. Based on the recent development in Segment One, the requests for zone changes and community concerns regarding the lack of commercial services, the 1987 zoning does not appear to be fulfilling the land use demands of the current market.



## Existing Conditions: Land Use and Zoning, Segment One

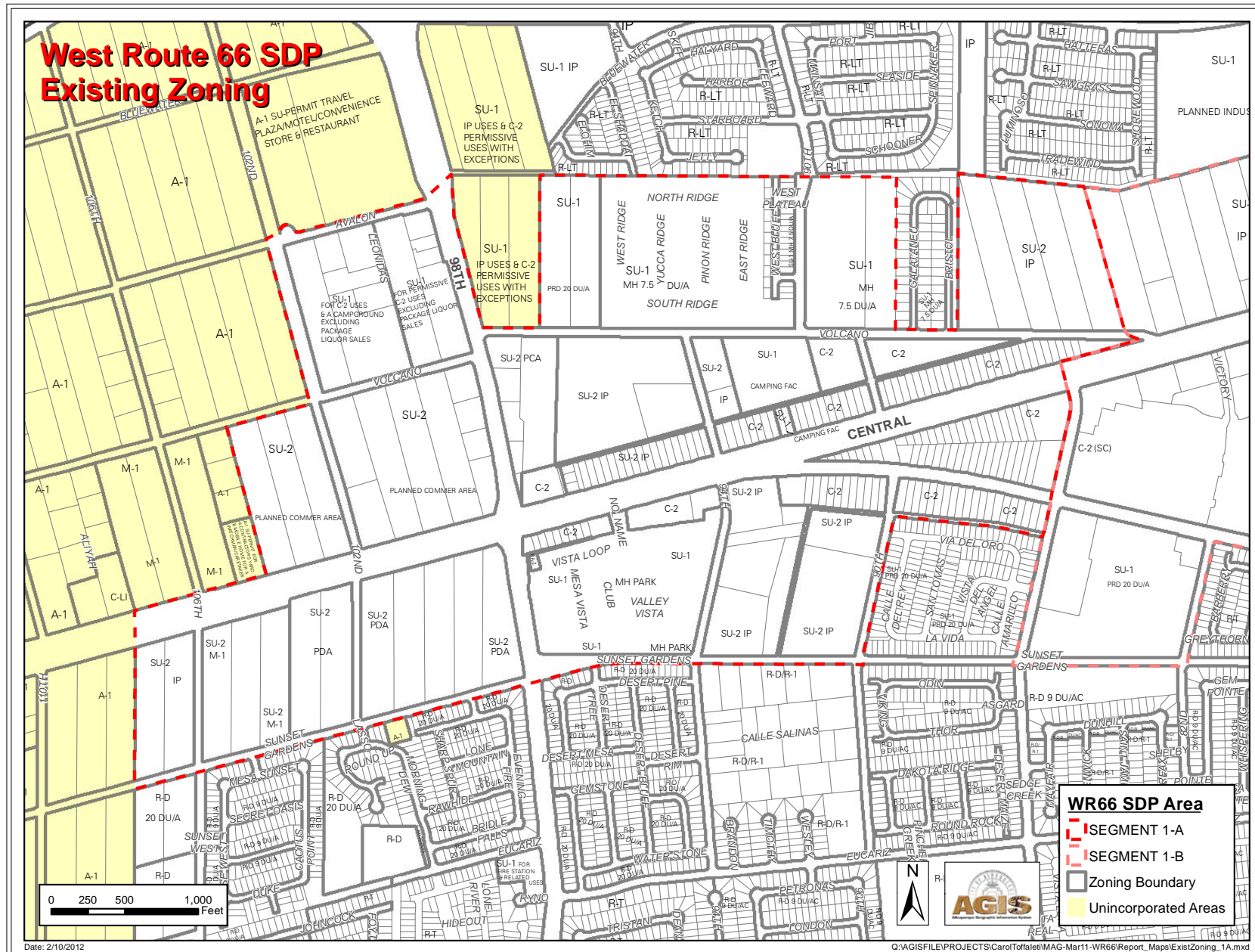


Figure 9: Existing Zoning, Segment One

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## Existing Conditions: Land Use and Zoning, Segment Two

### 1.3 Segment Two Land Use Analysis

Segment Two has a long history of corridor commercial activity, with initial businesses supporting automobile traffic to and from Albuquerque. Segment Two primarily consists of commercially zoned properties along the north and south sides of Central Avenue from Coors Boulevard to Rio Grande Boulevard. The segment is bisected by the Rio Grande, which historically has acted as a barrier, dividing the neighborhoods on either side of the Bosque into two unassociated areas. The eastern side of the river has a historical and land use relationship to Old Town, Downtown and the Country Club neighborhood while the western side of the river relates to the West Mesa and the South Valley neighborhoods.

Development patterns in the western portion of Segment Two tend to relate to the period in which the buildings were constructed. Older structures are built adjacent to the road, in many cases directly adjacent to the sidewalk with no parking, or parking in the rear. Development within the last 30 years tends to be set back from the street with parking in the front. Platting and lot sizes in this area vary, although lots are primarily narrow with an average depth of 150 feet. Block lengths are inconsistent, with small blocks of less than 300 feet alternating with blocks larger than 600 feet. Cross streets do not align north and south of Central. No alleys are present in this portion of the plan area.

There are two shopping center sites located at the intersection of Atrisco Dr. and Central Ave. The southwest corner includes a Kmart and several fast food restau-

rants and has seen little site improvements in the past 20 years. The northwest corner has recently been redeveloped and hosts two large anchor stores, Ross Dress for Less and Pro's Ranch Market, a private vocational college, as well as several smaller retailers offering neighborhood goods and services. The two shopping center sites, Atrisco Plaza and Kmart Plaza, create a super block west of Atrisco Dr. Other development along this portion of Central tends to be strip development or stand alone commercial. These uses include automobile services, restaurants and fast food, several Route 66 era motels and self-storage facilities, a charter school, Samon's lighting and some neighborhood goods and services. Several large tracts of vacant land exist throughout the segment.

Residential uses on Central Ave. west of the river are limited to some short term housing provided by former motel properties and a small lot zoned SU-1 for apartments on 59th street. Some multi-family residential zoning is located off the Central Ave. corridor in this portion of the Plan area behind commercial properties. Some of this property remains vacant with the exception of a small area of single family development located north of Central Ave. and east of Atrisco Dr. on property zoned R-2.

East of the river, uses include the Albuquerque BioPark, an apartment complex, Route 66 era motels, fast food restaurants, auto repair, Walgreens, and other neighborhood related goods and services. Development in the area ranges from pre-war to the more recent developments constructed during the housing boom of the past



Figure 11: Pro's Ranch Market



Figure 12: BioPark Entrance



## Existing Conditions: Land Use and Zoning, Segment Two

20 years. Several large land holdings are located east of the river. The Albuquerque BioPark occupies the largest parcel in the area, followed by The Beach, a multi-family housing development, the Old Town Shopping Center at the corner of Rio Grande and Central Ave., and several motels located on the north and south sides of the street. As a result of the large parcels, block sizes along this portion of Central tend to be long with limited connectivity to adjacent neighborhoods to the north and the south. Platting is irregular and many other lots are small, narrow and shallow. An alley exists on the south side of the street behind Central Ave., and a small road, Soto, serves as an alley for a portion of the properties on the north side of Central Ave.

Land uses east of the river have historically served tourist traffic along Route 66 and Old Town, as well as providing neighborhood services for area residents. Two of the larger parcels, the El Vado motel site, a historic Route 66 motorcourt on the National Register of Historic Places, and the former Casa Grande restaurant have recently come under City control and are anticipated to be catalytic revitalization projects for the area.

Many parcels along this section of Central are underutilized. Early motels are minimally maintained and function as short term housing. Older fast food restaurants are surrounded by parking, and some vacant parcels are located within walking distance of several of Albuquerque's most desirable attractions - Old Town, the BioPark and Tingley Beach - but fail to draw area tourists. The Old Town Shop-



Figure 13: Commercial development at Central and Rio Grande

ping Center provides one of the few locations for limited neighborhood goods and services for the Downtown, Old Town and Country Club neighborhoods.

In general, development patterns east of the river tend to have minimal setbacks with buildings located at the street; however, large portions of most sites in the plan area are devoted to parking which abuts the street edge. Frequent curb cuts, narrow sidewalks and limited pedestrian amenities make pedestrian access difficult and unpleasant.

### Large parcel land use (over 2 acres)

- Samon's site
- Kmart Plaza
- Atrisco Plaza (Ross, Pro's Ranch Market)
- Albuquerque BioPark
- El Vado Motel, other motels
- Old Town Shopping Center

### 1.4 Segment Two Zoning Analysis

Prior to the adoption of the 1987 plan, the zoning in Segment Two along Central Avenue consisted of primarily C-3 zoning between Coors Blvd. and Old Coors Rd. with a small portion of land on the southeast side of Coors Blvd. zoned residential. From Old Coors Rd. to the river, the zoning was C-2. With the adoption of the 1987 SDP, the C-3 zoning between Coors Blvd. and Old Coors Rd. became C-2 to match existing land uses.

There are some issues resulting from C-2 zoning requirements, given existing site constraints in Segment Two. Lot sizes and existing building configurations make meeting parking requirements on site difficult for most uses. Landscaping and buffering requirements are lacking on most sites, especially in parking areas. Zoning regulations for C-2 signage does not permit the historic use of "traveling" and building mounted signage which is commonly found in older signs along Central. In addition, current zoning requires that copy on a sign must be removed no more than 30 days from the date of vacancy of a business, which may conflict with any desire to preserve historic signs in this area.

## Existing Conditions: Land Use and Zoning, Segment Two

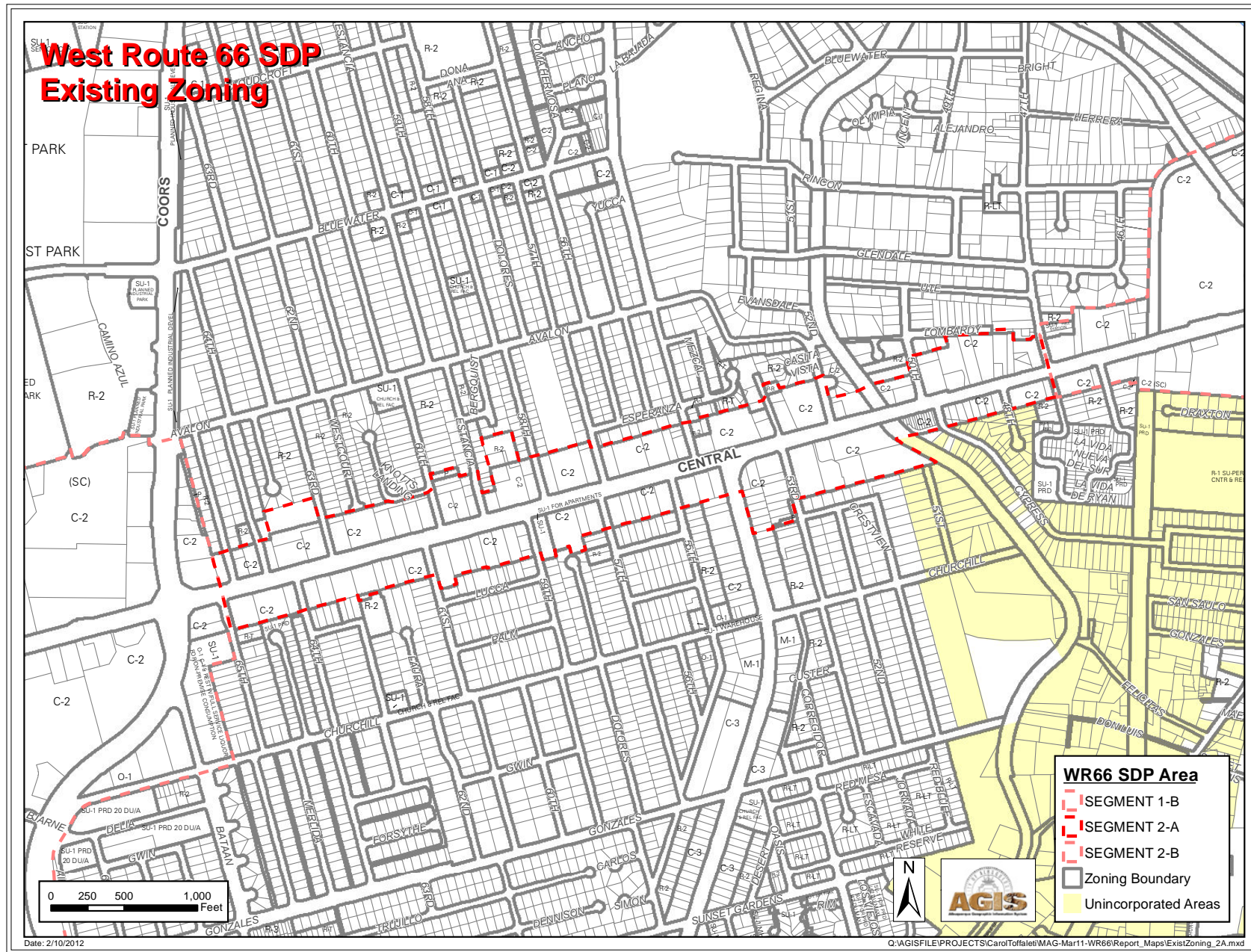


Figure14: Existing Zoning, Segment Two





## Existing Conditions: West Route 66 Retail Market Study

### 2.0 West Route 66 Retail Market Study

In January 2011 a Retail Market Analysis was completed by Gibbs Planning Group, Inc. (GPG) for the West Route 66 Sector Development Plan. The objective of the analysis was to evaluate the potential for retail development in the Plan Area in order to guide the creation of land use and zoning regulations in the Plan.

The study found that Albuquerque's West Central neighborhoods can presently support an additional 161,700 square feet of retail and restaurant development. By 2015 the study area can support an expansion to 185,800 square feet of new commercial growth.

### 2.1 Trade Area

Based on GPG's field evaluation, their analysis of the existing retail hubs, population clusters, highway access, and the retail gravitation in the market, as well as on their experience defining trade areas for similar communities throughout the United States, GPG determined that the West Central study area is a growing community which is generating demand to support a wide variety of additional neighborhood and community scale retailers. This potential will continue to grow over

the next five years, sustained by an annual population growth rate of 2.68 percent. The primary trade area is the consumer market where the West Central study area has a significant competitive advantage because of access, design, lack of competition, and traffic and commute patterns.

### 2.2 Demographic Characteristics

The West Central primary trade area has an estimated 2010 population of 98,575 persons, which is projected to grow to 112,500 by 2015, a 14.1 percent projected increase over the total five-year period (2010-2015). This annual growth rate is much greater than the Albuquerque, New Mexico or National levels.

### 2.2 Access

Regional linkage to the West Central study area is excellent, with multiple interchanges (Coors Blvd., Unser Blvd., 98th St., Atrisco Vista, and Central Ave.) along Interstate 40. The main north-south connector is Coors Blvd., which parallels the Rio Grande throughout Albuquerque. Eastern traffic flows are somewhat restricted by the limited number of local bridges crossing the Rio Grande.

High traffic volumes are largely the result of the limited employment base inside of the West Central study area. Morning traffic flows out of the district, due to the imbalance of jobs in the study area versus residents who commute outside of the study area.

### 2.3 Retail Competition

The strongest direct competition to the West Central Albuquerque study area are the community and neighborhood retail concentrations found along Coors Blvd., just north of the junction with Interstate 40, reaching past St. Joseph's Dr. This sprawling assemblage of neighborhood and community centers is anchored by a Walmart Supercenter and a Home Depot store. Additional retail includes a dense collection of full and limited service restaurants. This retail cluster is disadvantaged by being spread out over a two-plus mile stretch of busy local highway (Coors Blvd.). Consumers who need to shop at multiple stores are hampered by having to make multiple trips onto and off of busy Coors Blvd. while traveling from store to store.

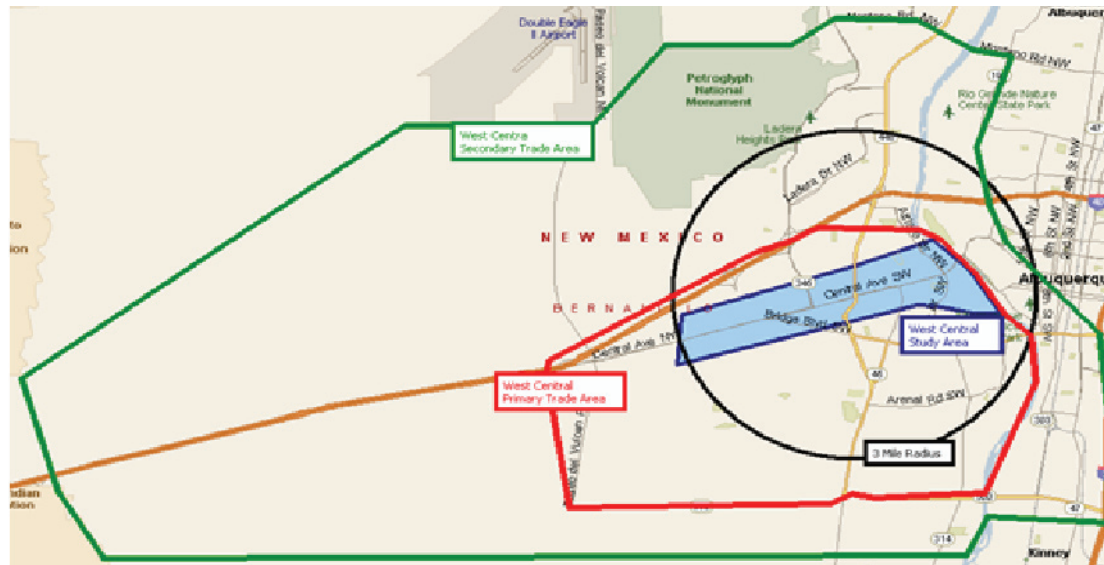


Figure 16: Trade Area. The West Central primary trade area is shown above inside the red line, and the total trade area is delineated by the green line.



### 2.4 Potential Types of Supportable Retail

- 66,500 square feet of Department and Discount Department Stores
- 16,300 square feet of Electronics, Appliances and Computer retail
- 15,300 square feet of Food & Restaurant
- 12,900 square feet of Sporting Goods, Hobby, Books and Music Stores
- 12,200 square feet of Health Care & Personal Services
- 11,700 square feet of Apparel, Shoes and Accessories
- 11,300 square feet of Hardware, Lawn and Garden Stores
- 7,700 square feet of Miscellaneous Retail, including: office supplies, gift shops, pet supplies, florists, and tobacco supplies.
- 6,200 square feet of Home Furnishings
- 1,600 square feet of Food and Beverage Stores: All of this supportable square footage can be concentrated into the convenience food category.

(Total : 161,700)

### 2.5 Rationale for Study Findings

*Strong demographic growth:* Although average and median household incomes are modest, the annual growth rate of 2.68 percent reflects a total growth rate of 14.1 percent by 2015. Regardless of disposable income levels, the growing base of households in the primary study area need daily goods.

*Existing retail infrastructure development:* The suddenness of the 2008 housing crisis and the 2009 financial crisis stopped residential and retail development in its tracks in the West Central District. This study area can fill first generation tenant space overnight at the retail centers on Unser Boulevard and Central Avenue, or begin construction of warehouse retailers without the delay of acquisition, approval, demolition, and infrastructure development.

*Single site critical mass development:* The West Central District's potential availability of a large, single site development, such as Unser Crossing, will likely attract new retailers to the market. In addition, existing retailers presently located along Coors Boulevard seeking to expand may consider relocating into new or infill West Central District shopping centers.

*Access to Surrounding Neighborhoods:* Although the West Central District is not located directly along Interstate 40, its convenience to surrounding neighborhoods will appeal to numerous modern retailers.

*Impacts on Other Business Districts:* The implementation of new shopping centers and the opening of new types of retailers that are not presently located in the West Central District area will capture projected population growth and household spending that is presently occurring elsewhere in the region, or not at all. This shift in consumer habits will impact existing retailers to various levels, depending on how they respond to the opening of new businesses. (The complete West Route 66 Retail Market Study is available online from the Planning Department.)

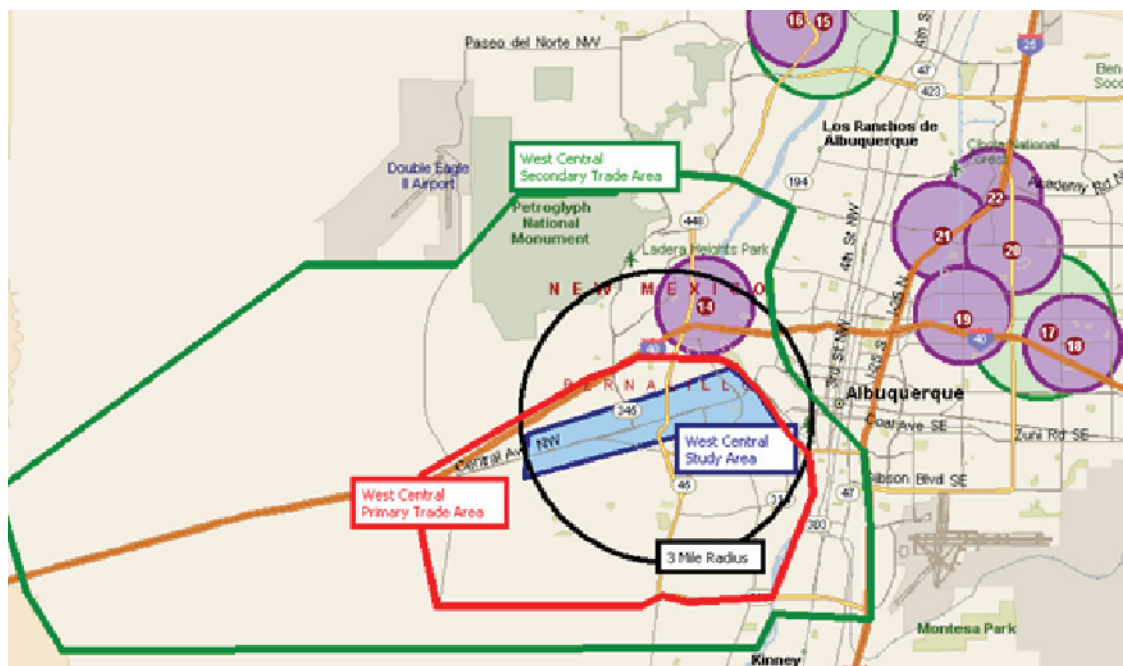


Figure 17: Regional and Community Retail Location Map. Community Retail Centers are marked with purple rings; Regional Retail Centers are indicated with green rings.

## Existing Conditions: Demographic Summary

### 3.0 Demographic Summary

Pending

## 4.0 Metropolitan Redevelopment Areas

In 2001 the Albuquerque City Council approved a Metropolitan Redevelopment Area (MRA) Designation for the West Central Area. Three years later, in 2004 the Council approved the West Central Metropolitan Redevelopment Area Plan. The Metropolitan Redevelopment Plan provides important guidance for overall redevelopment in the MRA area and identifies specific redevelopment strategies for opportunity sites. The West Route 66 Sector Development Plan includes a large portion of the MRA. The overlapping boundaries are along the Central Ave. corridor from west of Unser Blvd. to the west side of the Rio Grande. The MRA also extends beyond the Sector Plan boundary, to the south along Old Coors Blvd. and to the north, incorporating the Atrisco Business Park.

The City of Albuquerque Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency and the City Council are currently considering the creation of a new Historic Central MRA that would extend from the Central Bridge to Laguna Blvd. Also under consideration is the expansion of the West Central MRA to the western plan boundary of the new West Route 66 Sector Plan.

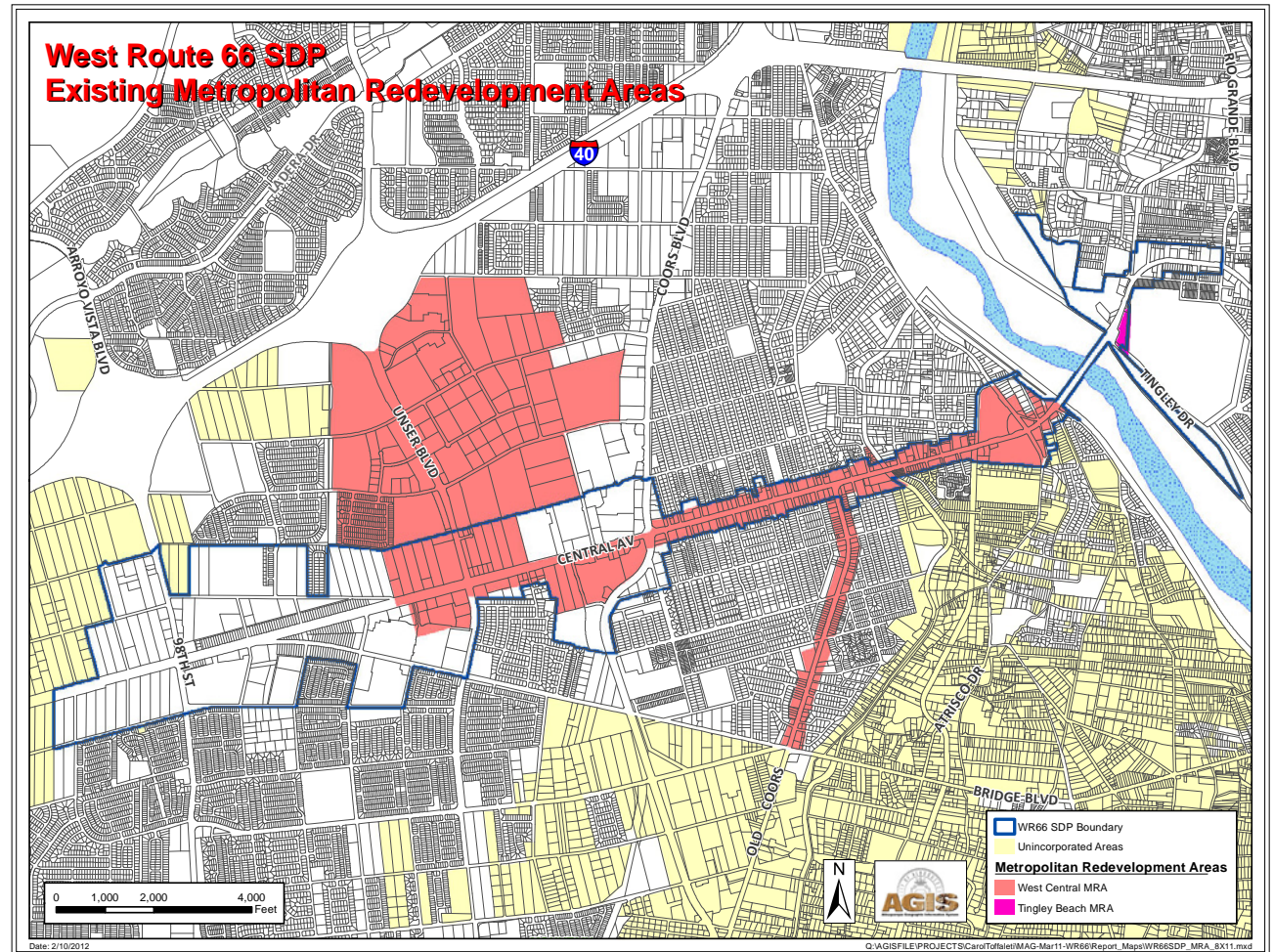


Figure 18: MRA map



## Existing Conditions: Historic Route 66

### 5.0 Historic Route 66 Overview

Historic US Route 66 played a key role in the development of West Central Ave. In 1937, the east/west realignment of Route 66 created the first paved road across New Mexico. Prior to the paving of Route 66, El Camino Real had provided the main route to and through Albuquerque, setting the pattern for development to extend in a north/south manner following the Rio Grande and the AT & SF Railroad tracks. However, with the 1937 east/west alignment of Route 66 through Albuquerque, development began to spread along the highway that is now known as Central Avenue. Businesses arose to meet the needs of the travelers along the highway. Travelers stopped at cafes, trading posts and New Mexico-themed motels in order to experience a taste of the local culture.

From 1933 to 1941, during the Great Depression, refugees fleeing the Dust Bowl traveled Route 66 on their way to work the agricultural fields of California. Less-troubled automobile owners also took to the highways, improved by New Deal-funded construction programs, to visit, recreate, or pursue opportunity.

During WW II, from 1942 to 1945, Route 66 fell into decline. Heavy trucks transporting war machinery were the primary users of the road and this led to disrepair. Businesses that catered to tourists struggled as they lost a large portion of their market.

The post-war years from 1946 to 1956 are known as the “Golden Age” of Route 66. The country entered a renewed period of prosperity after the war and more of the population was able to afford cars and vacations. The road once again began to serve visitors in search of adventure. It was at this time that the portion of Route 66 that runs through Albuquerque was widened from two lanes to four lanes. Financing for the construction of tourist-oriented businesses was easily available and roadside architecture along the route flourished. During the “Golden Age” of Route 66, the West Central corridor was populated with small mom and pop businesses such as service stations, restaurants and motor courts all intended to serve the passing motorists. In Albuquerque, trading posts along the corridor capitalized on the tourism potential of Native American culture by selling artifacts and souvenirs to Route 66 travelers.

In 1956, the Interstate Highway Act provided the funds to build a new highway system that would bypass cities and towns and provide an efficient, although ster-

ile, way of traveling across the country. Corporate franchises became the dominant business model in Interstate-proximate development. Route 66 began to decline as people opted to take the Interstate and no longer had convenient access to the small businesses that lined the highway and provided livelihoods for so many.

When Albuquerque’s Interstate 40 segment was completed in the 1960’s, I-40 joined Central Ave. at the two current interchanges near Tijeras Canyon and atop Nine Mile Hill. Central became an I-40 “business route” while most new highway oriented businesses went up near other I-40 interchanges. Route 66 was de-certified nationally in 1985, by which time Central Avenue’s travel based commerce had fallen far and not recovered.

Although most of the roadside buildings and signs built to entice travelers on Route 66 have been removed, remodeled or abandoned, the history and architecture associated with US 66 through Albuquerque has not been forgotten. In recent decades there has been renewed interest in preserving the remaining elements of Route 66 as a part of our cultural heritage. In 1991-1992, an inventory of highway segments and tourist-related properties was commissioned by the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Division and the Tourism Department. That inventory provided the foundation for further historic preservation initiatives. In 1993, it resulted in approval of the documentation of the Historic and Architectural Resources of Route 66 through New Mexico by the National Register of Historic Places, along with the listing of a number of local buildings, some on West Central Avenue in Albuquerque. The documentation provides the historic and architectural context for resources associated with Route 66 and describes the property types relevant to Route 66 history: cafes, gas stations, tourist courts and motels, trading posts/curio shops and municipal roadside attractions. In 1994, the New Mexico Legislature designated Route 66 as a State Scenic Byway, and in 1999 Route 66 was designated as a National Scenic Byway.

Today, Albuquerque retains enough original architecture of the period to make it a Route 66 heritage tourist destination. With the renewed interest in preserving the Route 66 history, the Plan has the opportunity to direct development in a way that celebrates and enhances its unique Route 66 history, as well as builds upon that identity to encourage business and high quality development to better serve residents and visitors.



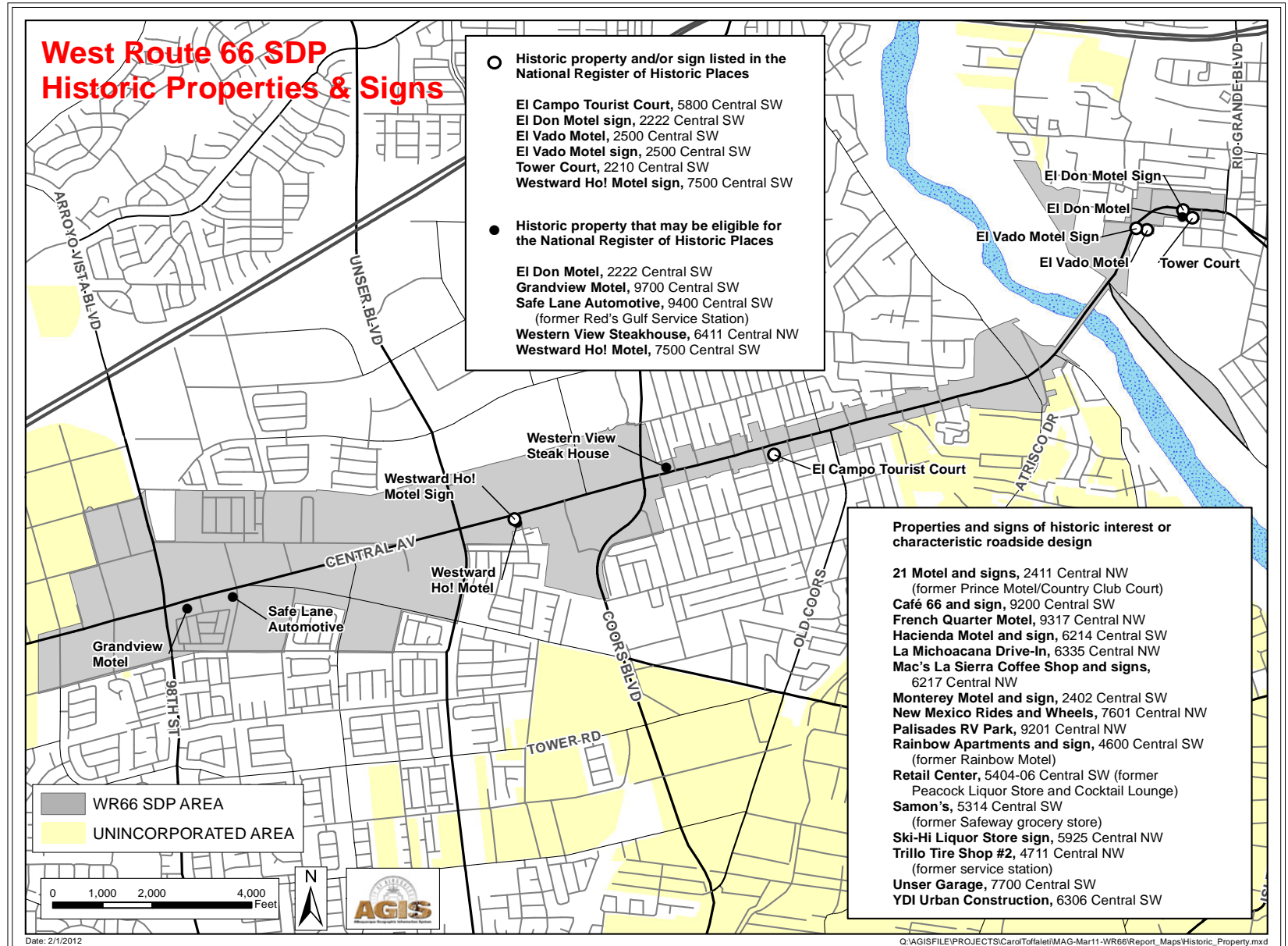


Figure 19: Historic Properties and Signs

## Existing Conditions: Historic Route 66

Officially, historic properties are those properties that are either listed on the National Register of Historic Places and/or the State Register of Cultural Properties, or have been determined by the appropriate agencies to be eligible for listing. Several properties in the Plan area are listed on the historic registers as shown on map on page 96. The Hilltop Lodge at 5410 Central, a Route 66 motel listed on the historic registers, was demolished in 2002.

### 5.1 Historic Buildings

Currently, there are three Route 66 buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places in the plan area. These are some of the earliest tourist courts that developed on West Central Ave. **El Vado Motel**, an example of Pueblo Revival style architecture opened in 1937. This iconic tourist court is a City Landmark. Once proposed for demolition, it was acquired by the City of Albuquerque and will be redeveloped with City assistance. **El Campo Tourist Court**, built in 1939 on West Route 66 approaching the escarpment, employed a regional Southwest Vernacular architectural style and once included a filling station and store. The **Tower Courts**, another little-altered pre WW II tourist court, in the Streamline Moderne style, also opened in 1939. A stepped, thirty-foot tower once accentuated the building's Moderne architectural style. Both the Towers Courts and El Campo Tourist Court have since been converted to apartment use.

Almost all of the remaining structures of historic significance were built in the post WW II Route 66 era. Notable buildings that may be eligible for the historic registers include the **Western View Diner and Steak House** and **Safe Lane Automotive**. Other motels that are potentially eligible for the historic registers as Route 66 resources include **El Don Motel**, the **Westward Ho Motel** and the **Grandview Motel**. To be considered eligible, a property must retain sufficient elements of location, design, and material, convey a strong association with automobile tourism and have been built between 1926 and 1956, the official period of significance for historic Route 66.

There are other buildings of historic interest in the plan area, such as the **Samon's** building (an early Safeway store), the **Monterey Motel** and its sign, the **Prince** and **Hacienda Motels**, **La Michoacana Drive-In** and the **Unser garage**. Some of these properties might be eligible for the historic registers under another registered historic context: Automobile Oriented Commercial Development.



*West Central Ave. in the plan area retains a notable collection of early tourist courts built between the 1930's and 1950's. These properties are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.*



*As shown on page xx, Tower Court (top photo) once featured a Streamline Moderne style tower.*

*These motels have been adapted for apartment use. Registered properties are eligible for state and federal tax incentives for rehabilitation.*



Figure 20: Historic Properties in Plan Area

## 5.2 Historic Signs

Roadside commercial signs in Albuquerque have ranged from the simple to the extreme. Painted on rocks or mounted on poles, walls and roofs, they were placed and sized for readability from a moving vehicle. When illuminated by electric light it was better yet, and here in Albuquerque, lighted signs transformed the urban landscape during the 20th century. First, incandescent bulbs were used to form words on, or outline, a sign. Bulbs flashing on and off sequentially imparted “motion” to a sign.

Neon signs first appeared in the United States in the 1920's and reached their height of popularity in the 1950's. Glass tubes bent into myriad shapes glowed on most commercial sites and even some churches. As with incandescent light, neon tubes could be switched for sequential illumination and movement. Neon tubes along the eaves or parts of a building, along with an illuminated sign, could transform even the simplest architecture into a dazzling nighttime spectacle.

In addition to buildings, three neon signs in the plan area are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (see page 96). The figurative signs of the **Westward Ho**, **El Don** and **El Vado Motels** represent some of the best examples of neon sign art. Restoration of the saguaro cactus and the lasso swinging cowboy was made possible with a grant from the National Park Service's Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program. This program makes grants to selected property owners who are willing to match restoration funds with those of the National Park Service. These distinctive signs evoke the Route 66 heyday and serve as minor landmarks in the miles-long corridor of West Central, even when they are not lighted. At night their glow warms the streetscape and marks the businesses even better.

### Sign as Icon

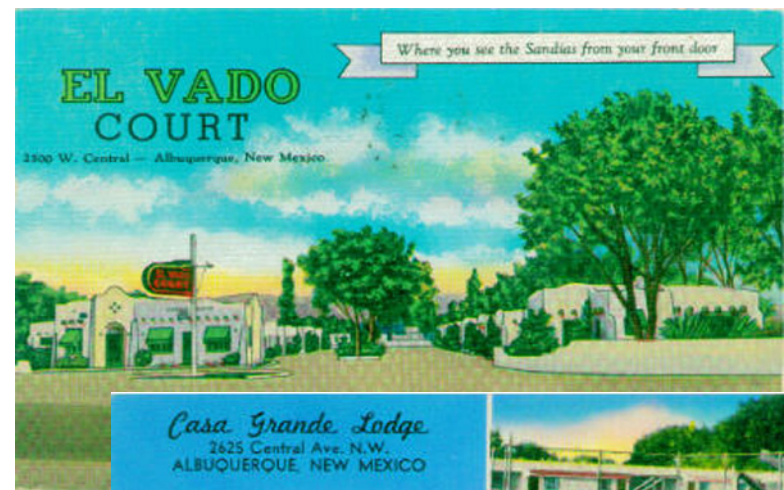
*“Signs often become so important to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. They become landmarks, loved because they have been visible at certain street corners-or from many vantage points across the City-for a long time. Such signs are valued for their familiarity, their beauty, their humor, their size, or even their grotesqueness. In these cases, signs transcend their conventional role as vehicles of information, as identifiers of something. When signs reach this stage, they accumulate rich layer of meaning. They no longer merely advertise, but are valued in and of themselves. They become icons.”* - - Preservation Brief #2, National Park Service



Figure 21: Historic Signs in Plan Area



## Existing Conditions: Historic Route 66



Many early automobile travelers on U.S. 66 preferred camping along the roadside to the more formal hotel accommodations downtown. In the 1920's, campgrounds, and then small cabins for daily rental began to appear along the road. Soon these entrepreneur business owners began to attach the cabins, often alternating units with carports. By the mid-1920's a new building form had emerged, with the lodging units unified under a single roof. Buildings were organized in two rows, "U" or "L" shaped and sometimes crescent-shaped. These building forms naturally defined a courtyard space, typically enhanced with landscaping, patios, picnic tables and the like, where travellers could socialize. These new businesses were most often family-run, and the owners lived on-site. Small curio or sundry stores and gaso-line pumps were often included. These new "Tourist Courts" were most often located on the outskirts of town where land was less expensive, and there were many on West Central Ave. It was not until the early 1950's that the term "motel" first appeared in Albuquerque City Directories. By that time, the pre-dominant lodging type had become a larger two-story building.

Figure 22: Historic Postcards of Plan Area Buildings



### 5.3 Issues and Opportunities

The Plan area has strong associations with historic US 66. Central Avenue is part of the Route 66 State and National Scenic Byway. Although much of the early roadside architecture has been lost, the plan area retains many of the “intrinsic qualities” of the historic roadway. These qualities include geography – sweeping vistas both east and west as one travels Central Avenue in the plan area and a picturesque river crossing. Cultural diversity is another quality that contributes to one’s experience of the road and the plan area has small, diverse, and distinctive roadside businesses. Despite some losses, the plan area retains a number of registered or eligible historic buildings and signs associated with Route 66.

It is important to consider the conservation of the remaining resources not only from the perspective of the plan area, but as a part of the whole Route 66 experience through Albuquerque. Each remaining resource is one vital link in a chain of historic properties that is sufficient to keep Albuquerque “on the map” in this heritage tourism niche.

#### 5.3.1. Conserving Historic Buildings

El Vado is an iconic Route 66 property. It is owned by the City of Albuquerque and was acquired because of its historic significance to the city. As a designated City Landmark, the property benefits from local controls over inappropriate alterations and demolition. Redevelopment can capitalize on El Vado’s proximity to other local cultural destinations including Old Town, the BioPark and Tingley Beach. Re-use that includes a strong interpretative component and public access will help to anchor an important cluster of cultural attractions on this portion of Central Avenue, a destination for locals and visitors alike.

Properties listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places can benefit from state and federal tax credit programs that support rehabilitation and preservation of historic properties. Property owners can utilize the existing Route 66 Multiple Property Documentation to register eligible Route 66 resources and take advantage of rehabilitation tax credits. Consult City and State historic preservation staff for direction and information.

Except for El Vado Motor Court, the historic properties in the plan area are not



Several properties in the plan area may be eligible for the State and National Registers of Historic Places (see map on page 96). A registered historic context, “Historic and Architectural Resources of Route 66 through New Mexico” can be used for building registrations.

Figure 23: Eligible Properties for Historic Registration

## Existing Conditions: Historic Route 66

protected from demolition and alterations that affect their historic integrity. Although properties that are listed on the State and National Registers are eligible for federal and state financial incentives for rehabilitation, listing does not include any development controls. A demolition review by-law can provide an opportunity for public and private sector dialogue when a historic property is proposed for demolition. Demolition review provides for a waiting period, under stated parameters, during which alternatives to demolition can be explored and implemented.

The City can also facilitate the preservation of historic buildings by purchasing conservation easements. A conservation easement is a voluntary, legally binding agreement between a landowner and a qualified land trust or government entity that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect ecological, historic, or scenic resources. It restricts real estate development, commercial and industrial uses, and other activities on a property to a mutually agreed upon level. The property remains the private property of the landowner. The decision to place a conservation easement on a property is strictly a voluntary one, where the easement is sold or donated. The restrictions of the easement are negotiable and, once set in place, are binding on all future owners of the property. For example, a conservation easement could provide a cash payment to the property owner by the City in return for a commitment to retain a historic façade or sign. Funding for such an easement program might utilize Scenic Byway or National Park Service grants, Metropolitan Redevelopment funds, or other combination of City resources including Lodger's Tax and Urban Enhancement funds.

### 5.3.2 Characteristic buildings

Other buildings in the plan area may not be eligible for the historic registers, but some display physical characteristics that are similar to designated historic properties and contribute to the visual character of the area. The examples opposite are a drive-in, a café, and a curio shop now in a different use. Their distinctive shapes and signs embody the exuberance of roadside commercial architecture. Improvements to these properties should respect their characteristic architecture and retain those elements that define the building's form. In these auto-oriented, stand-alone buildings, a key issue is strengthening the relationship of the building with the street and surrounding buildings and inviting pedestrian access. Landscaping and low walls at the property line can reinforce a connection with the street. Curb cuts should be limited to a maximum of 24 feet and clearly delineated.



*These buildings are characteristic of early roadside architecture and they compliment the collection of historic Route 66 properties in the plan area.*

Figure 24: Route 66 Roadside Architecture



### 5.3.3 Iconic Signs

In 2002, the City's Urban Enhancement Trust Fund in the Public Art Program funded a survey and management plan for signs and neon enhancements along Route 66 through Albuquerque. The report concluded that all surveyed signs were "threatened", that is, that none of these important resources have any degree of protection from loss. Key recommendations of the plan were that the City act to implement a comprehensive management plan to include conservation easements as discussed above, and make changes to regulatory codes to provide for the conservation of existing signs. The report emphasized the potential of these signs to contribute to economic development through tourism.

In 2002, the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program provided a grant to restore historic neon signs, where the owners and sign makers contributed 50% of cash or in-kind costs. Such incentives can still be utilized for further restoration activities, and the City can participate. A similar program specifically for Albuquerque might be developed with cooperation between various City agencies to fund financial incentives for both new and restored neon signs. The City can also set an example for the promotion of neon signage by installing such neon on City-owned properties along West Route 66 as a catalytic strategy.

Iconic signs in the Plan area, whether listed or eligible for the historic registers or not, can be promoted and preserved through zoning regulations that provide for their continuous display and through a conservation easement program as discussed above.



Figure 24: Route 66 Roadside Signage