



Executive Summary

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Planning does not have a defined beginning and end. It is an on-going process that responds to new information and circumstances and incorporates changing conditions into decisions. Circumstances that may change include physical conditions of buildings and/or infrastructure, economic climate, the natural environment, and social and community goals.

In early 2009, the City of Elkhart’s Planning & Development Department initiated a process to update its 1996 Comprehensive Land Use Plan and revise the planning and development direction for the City. The timing of this planning process uses the current economic “down time” to the City’s advantage to establish a framework for planning and development activity that is representative of the City’s vision for the future and value system. As Elkhart, the State of Indiana, and the nation continue to recover and re-adjust to the new economic normal, through its Comprehensive Plan Update, the City is preparing itself for new opportunities and investment over the next 20 years

Vision

A vision statement and six supporting goals were developed using input gathered during the planning process’ first Community Open House and refined by the Steering Committee. This vision statement incorporates the community values and factors of livability as identified by Elkhart citizens. It is an inspirational description of what Elkhart would like to be in the future and serves as a guide for decision-making and community expectations. The six goals represent six tenets of the City’s desired ultimate physical, social, and/or economic development that strengthen the vision and frame subsequent actions.

Elkhart is the city with a heart. It is a safe, attractive, and remarkable community featuring well-maintained neighborhoods, vibrant economy, distinctive downtown, environmental stewardship, and a coordinated transportation system offering its citizens a desirable quality of life through access to exemplary schools, public facilities, parks, and services. Elkhart is a well-respected destination of choice for living, working, and recreating achieved by responsible leadership and collaborative partnerships among citizens, the business community, institutions, and government.

Downtown/Cultural

Continue revitalization of Elkhart’s downtown to re-establish itself as a center of commercial, civic, cultural, and social activity.

Downtown is a part of Elkhart’s iconic identity. In most communities, the economic health and vitality of a city is gauged by the condition of its downtown. Revitalization of Downtown Elkhart has been a continuous effort for more than a decade.

Elkhart’s citizens and City leadership have indicated on numerous occasions that downtown is important and should be an economic development priority for the community. Downtown has many residential, retail, and commercial space competitors throughout Elkhart and the Michiana Region. Responding to this competition and downtown’s competitive advantages, the Comprehensive Plan Update recommends preparing downtown properties for a streamlined redevelopment process, capitalizing on downtown’s unique qualities, enhancing downtown’s civic, cultural, and social niche, and assisting the downtown management organization. The Comprehensive Plan Update supports the previous planning endeavors, in particular the 2004 Downtown Action Agenda, which outline strategies for downtown redevelopment, revitalization, and organizational initiatives.

Neighborhoods

Direct investment, amenities, and new housing development to established residential areas within the City’s boundaries to create additional opportunities for diverse ages, income levels, and stages of life in neighborhoods of choice.

Neighborhoods are the places where everyday life occurs. They create and form communities and flourish with the availability of quality and proximate housing, schools, jobs, health care, public safety, retail, and services. Elkhart’s residential population has experienced a modest increase since 2000. The demand for new housing, however, is stagnant and older neighborhoods near the center of the City are continuing to experience high vacancy rates. Residential growth has occurred primarily through annexation of subdivisions in suburban areas adjacent to Elkhart’s outer City limits. The Comprehensive Plan Update emphasizes the need and desire to maintain and reinvest in existing residential neighborhoods. This maintenance and reinvestment involves physical improvements to housing stock and gateways, public and private sector financial commitments, revised review and approval processes, and programmatic support to reinforce Elkhart’s residential neighborhoods. Through these various means, it is important to provide housing products at various price points that appeal to homebuyers and renters that demand a quality home in or near the center city.

Mobility

Establish and maintain a balanced and connected system for all modes of transportation within the City and to regional networks.

Elkhart’s transportation system includes air, rail, water, and surface. A balanced transportation system provides opportunity for all means of travel in a cooperative and coordinated manner to meet the needs of the community. It also fully integrates with adjacent

land uses, serves the travel demands and desires of citizens, and is compatible with the natural environment. A transportation system that provides safe, convenient, and efficient movement of traffic is vital to a community’s well-being. It has significant influence on the appearance, character, and economic viability and is an important consideration when current and future land use decisions are made. It affects the “where, when, and why” that development takes place and creates access to markets, employment, and investment.

The Comprehensive Plan Update’s recommendations pertaining to mobility include strategies that increase efficiency and safety while meeting the access and needs of all motorized and non-motorized modes of transportation. These recommendations are intended to assist public officials, developers, and other interested parties in making decisions relating to land use, public right-of-way improvements, funding opportunities, future public investment, and other transportation issues.

Aesthetics, Natural Resources & Open Space

Create opportunities for investment, activities, and programs that ensure protection of the City’s built and natural environments, maintenance of open space and greenways, and respect for its heritage.

Elkhart’s heritage and natural resources are essential components of the community. Most notably, the St. Joseph and Elkhart rivers have shaped the development of the City and their presence contributes to the community’s character, environmental quality, and recreational amenities. Because Elkhart’s natural resources are inherent components of the City, the provision of adequate greenspace and the protection of sensitive environmental areas must be considered as necessary public facilities similar to infrastructure and utility services. Additionally, heritage preservation is also an important local government service and a sensible investment, returning multiple benefits from modest expenditures. The intent of the Aesthetics, Natural Resources & Open Space Goal of this Comprehensive Plan Update is to protect significant, scarce, non-renewable resources and develop ways to capitalize on these assets while advancing preservation endeavors. To achieve this goal, environmental and heritage stewardship should be approached as a shared responsibility. Efforts will require coordination among City departments, not-for-profit organizations, the private sector, and other local, state, and federal agencies to work together to maintain Elkhart’s unique sense of place.

Health & Safety

Coordinate public services and amenities with land use decisions to protect the well-being and quality of life of Elkhart’s citizens and its environment.

The advantages of amenable intergovernmental relations include thoughtful and proficient land use decision-making processes, coordinated growth management and preservation, efficient delivery of services, and economies of scale. Growth and development cross jurisdictional boundaries and departmental responsibilities. There are no requirements for comprehensive plans to address intergovernmental collaboration. However, as one of the six primary goals of this Comprehensive Plan Update, the health and safety of the Elkhart community includes maximizing public resources through cooperation, streamlined processes, and consolidated efforts to provide for responsible use of land and logical growth. By coordinating decision-making and approval processes, the City of Elkhart can better connect and align transportation systems, City services, and other infrastructure and resources with neighborhoods, commercial centers, institutions, and recreational facilities.

Planning Themes

Four primary planning themes have developed throughout the planning process:

- 1. Land Use
- 2. Environment & Design
- 3. Economic Development
- 4. Corridor Character (land use + transportation)

Diagrams illustrating these primary planning themes were presented to the Steering Committee members and Public throughout the process for feedback, comment and approval. The summary of the concepts are as follows:

Future Land Use Plan

There are only slight differentiations between the existing and future land use maps. The future land use map introduces a new land use category, mixed-use. This land use category is not represented in the City’s existing land use, nor is it mentioned in the 1996 *Comprehensive Plan*. The trend throughout the US was the separation of uses. The planning profession and community leaders have determined that a mix of uses in certain places in a community will help an area thrive and provide the quality of life residents are looking for.

The overall concept of the proposed future land use plan is to maintain and reinvest in the core of the City, including residential neighborhoods, commercial districts, industrial areas, institutions, infrastructure, and open space within the existing City limits. In addition to the new mixed-use land use category, the future land use plan includes more commercial uses and less industrial uses along key corridors. Mixed-use emphasizes retail and housing and reinforces the *Downtown Action Agenda's* four districts. Once this plan is adopted, and the City completes its current annexations, the 1986 annexation plan will have been substantially met. Therefore, to reflect the goals of the *Comprehensive Plan Update*, the annexation plan should be updated.

Future Environment & Design Framework

The overall concept of the proposed future environment & design framework includes three components: 1) focus on and improve first impression areas such as entry points into the City and along key transportation routes to enhance the visual perception of Elkhart; 2) capitalize on natural features for economic and environmental sustainability; and 3) set a higher standard for design within the community.

As illustrated on the framework diagram, eight key entry points in the City are highlighted for aesthetic enhancement. The Riverwalk is proposed to expand outside of the downtown districts and a new blue line trail connects parks, natural habitat areas, and other waterfront amenities along the St. Joseph River. Additionally, an expanded South Main Street District as defined in the *Downtown Action Agenda* enhances the economic and physical environment of the City's southern gateway. Expanded overlay district boundaries include the Main Street corridor south of downtown; reinforced overlay district parameters will help to distinguish appropriate design and development in both urban and suburban contexts.

Future Economic Development Framework

The overall concept of the proposed future economic development framework is to target new investment to high profile locations that offer the highest return on investment potential.

The framework diagram highlights five significant (high profile) redevelopment areas identified for new investment, eight key entry points (also high profile) in the City are highlighted for aesthetic enhancement, ten areas of concentrated activity within walking distance of residential neighborhoods identified for additional neighborhood-scaled development, and expanded overlay district boundaries to include the Main Street corridor south of downtown.

Corridor Character Framework

The corridor character framework has been a work in progress since the planning process’ first public open house in January 2010. At that time, Elkhart citizens were asked to assign “personalities” to major and minor arterials, or road segments, throughout the City. These personalities consider both transportation and adjacent land uses and the reciprocal relationship between these two functions.

The framework’s overall concept uses the identified personalities to guide future corridor design and development of public and private spaces. There are five identified corridor types that are present throughout the City including: 1) industrial corridor, 2) commercial corridor, 3) commuter route, 4) neighborhood link, and 5) scenic drive. Application of corridor character types reflects the land use and transportation relationship and a road may traverse through several corridor character types with a change in context and adjacent land uses.

Conclusion

The Elkhart Comprehensive Plan should serve as Elkhart’s guide for land use and development policies for development and redevelopment in the study area. The long range goals, objectives, and recommendations, along with the supporting maps, are intended to guide development decisions towards the community’s collective vision of the future. Members of the city staff, Plan Commission and City Council should interpret the goals and objectives as a long-term and deliberately broad vision. The commission and council should keep in mind that this plan reflects the community’s values. City officials cannot expect to control all circumstances. However, the spirit of this plan should be adhered to in order to ensure that the community’s values are maintained. The strategic action steps, on the other hand, are intended to direct the day-to-day decisions concerning more specific and task oriented activities. Members of the City Council should interpret the strategic actions steps by saying, “given our long-term goals and changing community conditions, these are the projects and programs that we want to complete in the short-term and long-term, and this is how we plan to accomplish them.” Interpreting the plan in this way will enable the members of both the commission and city to justify their approval, or denial, of any proposed development or redevelopment in Elkhart.

The City’s comprehensive plan contains many different recommendations in each Chapter that will be carried out through existing departments and programs. During the creation of this plan, several departments have come together to create

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this plan. The future implementation of the plan requires the on-going relationship between these departments. Strong partnerships are needed to foster good communication and provide additional alliances in the implementation of some of these recommendations. The implementers/champions should present the recommendations of this plan formally to the City's various boards and commissions.

The implementation of the comprehensive plan will require the City's financial commitment and support to carry out the policies and achieve the vision and goals set forth herein. These financial commitments should include programs and policies the city currently has in place. Although it is the City's intent to administer this plan with the current financial resources available, monies may need to be set aside in future budgets to carry out some of the recommended actions. The adoption of the Comprehensive Plan does not authorize expenditures for its implementation. The City Council, in accordance with state statutes and the City policies, may authorize the financial resources to implement the plan.