

How we grow

It is clear from planning workshops for the IC2030 update and various district plans, as well as public input regarding recent zoning and development applications, that people care deeply about how Iowa City grows. There is a tension between the sense of smallness and tradition that people value and identify as being uniquely Iowa City and the uncertainty that comes with change in a growing community. At the edge of the city, residents often view with consternation the development of agricultural land, woodlands, and open vistas. Likewise, residents of established neighborhoods near the downtown and campus feel threatened as the demand for rental housing (esp. short-term, student rentals) results in increased density or other changes that alter the character of neighborhoods.

As stated in the introduction to this plan, Iowa City's population has increased in every decade for the last century, even during the years of the Farm Crisis when the state lost population. People continue to relocate to Iowa City for the very things that attracted most current residents: access to high-quality jobs and education, a positive business environment, safe neighborhoods, exceptional healthcare, senior living options, and a lively arts and culture scene. The question is not whether Iowa City will grow, but rather how we will grow. The IC2030 Plan builds upon the 1997 Plan, including the District Plans, to support sustainable growth: development that preserves what is best about our community in terms of both built environment and undeveloped areas, while maintaining Iowa City as an attractive, safe, affordable, and accessible place to live.

Creating and sustaining healthy neighborhoods

When asked what they like best about Iowa City, participants in an on-line survey and in planning workshops consistently describe a community that offers big-city culture and diversity with the charm and convenience of small-town living. The ease of getting around town and ready access to parks, schools, shopping, and healthcare are not by accident. Current City policies support the efficient use of land for new development by encouraging compact, contiguous development at the edge of the City while focusing greater urban density close to our employment centers, especially in the Downtown and near campus areas. Iowa City's Zoning Code and Subdivision Regulations, along with the strategies contained in the District Plans, focus on the creation of neighborhoods that provide housing for a diverse population, a mix of land uses, public spaces that provide a focal point for the neighborhood, accessible open space for recreation and social interaction, integrated civic and commercial centers, and a network of streets that provide safe and efficient travel for cars, buses, bikes, and pedestrians.



A compact neighborhood in Iowa City's Southeast District.

Compact, contiguous neighborhood design benefits developers, homeowners, and taxpayers

- Uses less land (slows outward growth of the city).
- Provides opportunities to preserve unique features of a site, such as natural areas, historic features, and open space that add character and amenity value to the new neighborhood.
- Less costly to construct and maintain public infrastructure—streets, water, sewer, other utilities.
- Less costly to provide public services—including transit, waste and recycling pick-up, snow removal, public safety and emergency response.

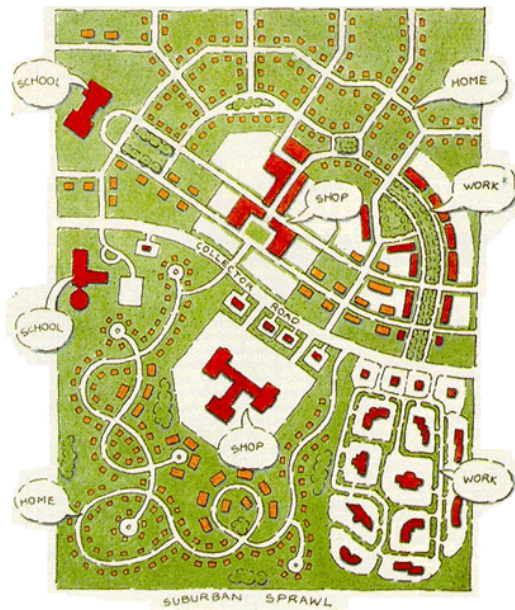


IMAGE courtesy U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration.

A well-planned neighborhood on the top half of the image, is contrasted with urban sprawl on the lower half of the image. Neighborhoods with connected street networks allow residents to move throughout their neighborhood with ease and to travel to nearby commercial or employment centers via multiple routes. A compact neighborhood with a well-connected street pattern also allows the community to provide utilities and services in the most efficient manner, which saves money for taxpayers.

What follows is a list of Iowa City's principles for creating and sustaining healthy neighborhoods. These principles are woven throughout Iowa City's eight completed District Plans, as well as the Master Plans for Towncrest and the Downtown and Riverfront Crossings:

Preserve Historic Resources and Reinvest in Established Neighborhoods: Adopting strategies to assure the stability and livability of Iowa City's historic and established neighborhoods helps to preserve the culture, history, and identity of Iowa City. Investing in the neighborhoods that are closest to major employers in the city preserves opportunities for people to live close to work, school, and shopping; promotes walking and bicycling; and reduces vehicle miles traveled. In addition, many established neighborhoods contain affordable housing options along walkable, tree-lined streets where City services and infrastructure are already in place and where neighborhood elementary schools and parks are the focal point of neighborhood activity and identity.

Compatible Infill Development: Quality infill development plays an important role in neighborhood re-investment and may include rehabilitating existing structures or encouraging new development of vacant, blighted, or deteriorated property. Development of infill sites should add to the diversity of housing options without compromising neighborhood character or over-burdening infrastructure, including alleys and parking.

Diversity of Housing Types: A mix of housing types within a neighborhood provides residential opportunities for a variety of people, including singles, couples, families with children, and elderly persons. Integrating diverse housing sizes and types throughout the community increases the opportunity for people to live in the same neighborhood throughout the stages of life. A rich mix of housing within a neighborhood may include single-family homes on small and large lots, townhouses, duplexes, small apartment buildings, and zero-lot-line housing, as well as apartments in mixed-use buildings located in neighborhood commercial areas and the Downtown.

Affordable Housing: By allowing for a mix of housing types, moderately priced housing can be incorporated into a neighborhood, rather than segregated in one or two areas of the community. Small multi-family buildings can be incorporated on corner lots adjacent to arterial streets, and townhouses and duplex units can be mixed with single-family homes within a neighborhood. Apartments located above commercial businesses provide needed housing while increasing the local customer base for the commercial establishments.

Neighborhood Schools: Neighborhood schools, particularly elementary schools, are an integral part of healthy, sustainable neighborhoods. Schools serve not only as centers of education but as a focal point for

community gathering and neighborhood identity. In addition, the school grounds provide opportunities for exercise and recreation for neighborhood residents throughout the year. Neighborhood elementary schools have a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding neighborhood where the school is an essential element that contributes to the quality of life. This in turn contributes to the social connections, identity, safety, and well-being of the families whose children attend the school.

Neighborhood Commercial Areas: Neighborhood commercial areas can provide a focal point and gathering place for a neighborhood. The businesses within a neighborhood commercial center should provide shopping opportunities within convenient walking distance for the residents in the immediate area. The design of the neighborhood commercial center should have a pedestrian orientation with the stores placed close to the street, but with sufficient open space to allow for outdoor cafes and patios or landscaping. Parking should be located to the rear and sides of stores with additional parking on the street. Incorporating apartments above shops and reserving public open space are two ways to foster additional activity and vitality in a neighborhood commercial area. Some aspects of commercial development such as auto-oriented uses, parking lots, bright lights, and signage needed to be located, screened, or buffered so that they do not detract from nearby residential uses.

Interconnected Street System: Grid street systems help to reduce congestion by dispersing traffic, since there are multiple routes to get from point A to point B. In addition, by providing more direct routes, interconnected streets can reduce the vehicle miles traveled each day within a neighborhood, provide more direct walking and biking routes to neighborhood destinations, and reduce the cost of providing City services.

Streets as More than Pavement: Streets and the adjacent parkways and sidewalks can be enhanced and planned to encourage pedestrian activity. Street trees, benches, sidewalks, and attractive lighting along the street help create pleasant and safe public spaces for walking to neighborhood destinations and for socializing with neighbors. Streetscape amenities help establish a sense of distinction, identity, and security within a neighborhood. In residential neighborhoods, narrower street pavement widths slow traffic, reduce infrastructure costs, and allow for a more complete tree canopy over the street.

Shallow Front Yard Setbacks: Placing homes closer to the street allows more backyard space and room for garages and utilities if there is also an alley located behind the home. Shallow setbacks (15-20 feet is the code standard for residential uses) combined with narrower street pavement widths, create a more intimate pedestrian-scale public space along the street, which encourages walking and social interaction.



A concept design included in the Southwest District Plan shows a future neighborhood with public open space, trails, and commercial areas integrated into the neighborhood. Within the neighborhood there are opportunities for single-family housing as well as multi-family and townhomes. Woodland areas, are preserved as features that add value to the neighborhood and stormwater management creates a small lake that could serve as a neighborhood focal point.



Photo of Brookland Park. Parks provide a focal point for the surrounding neighborhood and an opportunity for social interaction and recreation.

Narrower Lot Frontages: Compact development makes efficient use of land and reduces costs associated with the provision and maintenance of public improvements, such as streets, sewers and water lines. This benefits developers and tax payers. Narrower lot frontages combined with smaller lots sizes reduces the overall cost of new housing construction, creating opportunities for more moderately priced housing.

Use of Alleys: Providing parking and utilities from a rear alley or private lane is particularly advantageous in neighborhoods with narrower lot frontages. This arrangement reduces driveway paving and interruptions to the sidewalk network, allows more room for front yard landscaping, and increases the availability of on-street parking for visitors. In addition, when garages are accessed from alleys, vehicular traffic and congestion on residential streets is reduced.

Pedestrian/Bikeway Connections: Important neighborhood destinations, such as parks, schools, bus stops, and neighborhood shopping centers should be readily accessible by pedestrians and bicyclists. This requires a continuous sidewalk system, strategically located trails, and on-street bicycle facilities. Bike routes that intersect with key neighborhood destinations may be aligned along neighborhood streets or constructed in stream buffer areas or within major sanitary sewer easements. A pleasant streetscape with trees and appropriate building setbacks and driveway separation creates an environment that is safe and appealing for pedestrians and cyclists.

Parks, Trails and Open Space: Neighborhood parks are small, one- to seven- acre open spaces that provide a focal point for informal gatherings and recreation within easy walking distance from most homes in the neighborhood. Neighborhood parks should be centrally located or situated adjacent to a school or a neighborhood commercial area and designed as an integral part of an interconnected system of open space with trails or wide sidewalks to connect neighborhood parks with larger community and regional parks. Preservation of sensitive areas, such as wetlands, woodlands, and stream corridors and their buffers, provides an opportunity to shape and enhance a neighborhood, while maintaining scenic and natural resources and wildlife habitat. Wherever possible, natural features, such as waterways and woodlands, should be incorporated as key amenities within parks and along trail systems.

Buffer Residential Development from Incompatible Uses: To help assure the long-term livability of neighborhoods, provide sufficient buffers between residential development and land uses and activities, such as the waste water treatment plant, Interstate 80 and Highway 218, and the landfill.

Public Safety: Iowa City works to ensure public safety throughout the community. The establishment of Fire Station 4, the Police Substation at Pepperwood Plaza, and cooperative efforts with neighborhood groups, schools, and the University of Iowa demonstrate this commitment. Resources are directed toward education, crime prevention, and enforcement to enhance the quality of life in Iowa City.