

Southwest District Plan Update

Stakeholder Meeting Summary



This document summarizes public input heard throughout focus group and technical committee meetings held in December 2020 through January 2021 for the South Rohret Subarea update to the Southwest District Plan. In total, 46 stakeholders were engaged, as shown below in Table 1. The document includes overarching themes heard throughout focus group meetings, and a summary of comments which provides additional details and specific thoughts and concerns.

A questionnaire is available online as a forum for broader public input. As of January 14, 2021, 130 responses have been received. A summary of those results will be provided when the survey closes. The questionnaire is currently available on the project website at www.icgov.org/sw-plan-update.

Questions can be directed to Kirk Lehmann, Associate Planner, at kirk-lehmann@iowa-city.org.

Table 1: Focus Group Meetings and Attendance

Group	Date	Time	Attending
City-Wide Stakeholders	December 15, 2020	10:30 am	5
Area Organization Stakeholders	December 15, 2020	1:30 pm	4
Owners	December 15, 2020	3:00 pm	3
Owners	December 15, 2020	4:00 pm	1
Owners	December 16, 2020	1:30 pm	2
Iowa City Community School District	December 17, 2020	3:00 pm	3
Development Community	December 22, 2020	10:30 am	9
Development Community	January 6, 2021	9:30 am	4
Parks & Recreation Commission	January 13, 2021	5:00 pm	7
Technical Committee	Ongoing		8
Total			46
Meetings included representatives from: Neighborhood Associations (Tyne Cae & Country Club Estates), Johnson County (Planning/Development/Sustainability & Poor Farm), ICCSD, ICAAR, HBA, Owners (including Oaknoll), Affordable Housing Coalition, City of Iowa City (Climate Action Commission, Parks and Rec Commission, NDS, PW, MPO, ICFD)			

OVERARCHING THEMES:

Several recurring themes were heard throughout the focus group meetings. They included:

- **Access and Connectivity.** The westernmost portion of the Southwest District has limited access to the City across Highway 218, specifically at Rohret Road, Highway 1, and Melrose Avenue. North/south connectivity between these roads is essential to future development in this area.
- **Traffic Concerns.** Rohret Road is the current primary street to access existing development west of US-218. It experiences some congestion during peak traffic hours. Future development may require improvements to Rohret Road, Highway 1, and/or routes between them to address congestion, especially at choke points like Weber Elementary. Adequate transit access, and bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, can also help reduce congestion.
- **Building a New Neighborhood.** The area is desirable for a mix of housing types and price points due to potential access to amenities like parks, new schools, and trails, and due to proximity to the University as a large employment center. This provides unique future opportunities for development, such as clustered residences or “agri-hoods”.

- **Regional Amenities and Trails.** Stakeholders are supportive of a regional stormwater management system surrounded by park space. It would function as a neighborhood and city-wide amenity, provide a new attraction to this part of town, and preserve existing habitat. Trails should surround the park and connect to other areas of the City.
- **Importance of Public Services.** With the potential for new development, fire protection and additional schools must be planned. As development progresses west, sewers may become a limiting factor for development, largely due to topographic constraints.
- **Neighborhood Commercial.** Commercial development on Rohret Road and Highway 1 could serve the neighborhood, though commercial areas would likely need to be small in size and targeted in scope, with appropriate transitions to residential neighborhoods.

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

Comments from all meetings are organized and consolidated by topic below. As a summary, it does not include every comment made during these meetings.

Road Access

- The Southwest District has limited access from the west due to Highway 218, with Rohret Road being the primary connection for most existing development. Highway 1 provides access for some limited existing development as well.
- While physically close, it takes a while to travel to destinations, which can make the area harder to market and/or develop.
- North/south road connections between Rohret Rd, Melrose Ave, and Highway 1 are essential, and making those connections are as important as the trunk sewer being extended under Highway 218. Slothower Road is a good candidate to connect Rohret to Melrose.
- A direct route to Coralville along the planned 965 extension will encourage development, though the plan should not be contingent on it because it will not occur for a long time.
- Kennedy Parkway crossing 218 would also provide an additional route for traffic.

Traffic Concerns

- Traffic for development on Rohret Rd is manageable, but it takes time to cross US-218.
 - Traffic can bottleneck at Weber Elementary during school drop off and especially pick up when everyone arrives at the same time; the school district is trying to mitigate this by utilizing side streets and encouraging walking.
 - Turn lanes on Rohret by Weber may increase safety and reduce traffic congestion
- There are concerns about development affecting traffic on Benton Street.
- It can be challenging to get on Highway 1 at uncontrolled access points from 7 am – 9 am and 3:30 pm – 5 pm due to traffic; in the future, it will likely need stoplights and possibly turning lanes.

Active Transportation

- Access to sidewalks, trails, and parks have become increasingly important with COVID.
- Trails and bicycle infrastructure could be an asset for the area to attract residents and promote walking. Trails should connect to adjacent parks and other areas of the City.
- As development occurs south of Rohret Rd, safe crossings to Weber Elementary should be considered, such as an underground pathway. The need may decrease depending on the location of future schools, the growth of the area, and catchment areas.

Transit

- Transit is an important source of transportation and should be extended as this area grows.
- Changes to transit service has resulted in some areas in the Southwest District experiencing reduced access. Further possible service reductions are a concern, including the Melrose Express that runs to the Poor Farm.
- Transit should be considered an essential service for this area as it will help reduce reliance on personal automobiles and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Public Services

- The sewer extension under Highway 218, currently planned for 2023, is needed for urban-scale development; as such, development will likely follow the sewer line.
- Fire protection primarily depends on access and ability to respond. It will become more important as the area grows, so a future fire station should be considered west of US-218, either on Highway 1 or Rohret.
- Enrollment at Weber may reach capacity in 1-2 years. Given the amount of potential growth west of Highway 218, 2 additional elementary schools and possibly a junior high should be considered (15-18 acres for the elementary site and 50-60 acres for the elementary/junior high site).
- The City should consider Green infrastructure, like the Sycamore Greenway in the South District.

Housing and Neighborhoods

- People want to live in this area (and send kids to West High), but housing is not always available; this indicates a large demand for housing.
 - A neighborhood close to outdoor recreation is great, which along with new schools, scenic rolling hills, and proximity to the University will drive demand in this area.
 - COVID has increased the desire for housing with good access to trails, nature, and other recreational opportunities (such as fishing, birding, hiking, and biking).
- There are currently only single-family homes west of Highway 218
 - A diversity of housing types and price points with more density should be considered.
 - The City should strive to maintain Weber at its current free and reduced lunch rates.
- There may be an opportunity for alternative developments which can promote affordability.
 - May be able to develop micro or pocket neighborhoods it is difficult to place streets.
 - May be able to develop agri-hoods with small lots around a common ag-related space.
- Affordability is important because nothing will be built if people can't afford it, even with low interest rates; if it costs more to develop (such as through required alleys or longer, more complicated review processes), homes become less affordable.
- The affordable housing requirement should be clarified and implemented at the time of annexation rather than later in the development process; staff should take a more active role in deciding if housing should be onsite or paid as a fee in lieu of units.
- Equity is one of the most important considerations for sustainable development, and there are also opportunities to use green construction technique on larger buildings.

Commercial Development

- Commercial developments would be nice for residents in this area to avoid crossing US-218.
 - Businesses searching for space typically ask for high traffic counts and turning movements; Rohret Rd and Highway 1 are the two most likely locations.
 - Businesses often need more than the local neighborhood for support, though there is some opportunity for targeted commercial with limited square footage.

- Lower demand means lower prices, so buildings must be thoughtful of the end user.
- For commercial development on Rohret Rd, there is good visibility but limited access.
 - Could support local services/offices but may be difficult to attract big businesses.
 - Commercial will be more attractive with north/south routes to Melrose and Highway 1.
- Commercial uses may be more successful on Highway 1 near other existing commercial.
 - There is existing intensive commercial development in unincorporated Johnson County on Highway 1, near Sharon Center Rd; if that use expands, it will likely be for flex space or other intensive commercial uses rather than neighborhood commercial uses.
 - Will need to carefully transition between commercial areas and residential areas.
- In denser markets, COVID is increasing commercial vacancies due to new online demand and telecommuting options.
 - It may affect office space, but attendees don't believe it will impact Iowa City as much.
 - There may be some demand to convert vacant commercial space into residential units outside of the South Rohret Subarea, but many realtors are currently experiencing high demand.

Parks, Open Space, and Stormwater Management

- There is a need for a recreation center on this side of town, with space for indoor sports and aquatics, and possibly outdoor recreational uses.
- Flash flooding affects neighbors east of 218 after the stream crosses under Mormon Trek; improvements upstream can affect that negatively (through construction of impervious surfaces) and positively (through thoughtful stormwater management)
- Green infrastructure like the regional stormwater lake in the 2002 plan would be great.
 - Something like Terry Trueblood is more advantageous as a selling point compared to multiple "puddles" in subdivision-level stormwater systems.
 - It could provide biking, hiking, and birding opportunities and preserve the natural landscape, including any native prairies and bird habitats
- A regional lake concept depends on the City to take ownership, in addition to landowners.
 - Impact or development fees should offset losses for landowners that cannot develop, but the City should meet with stakeholders to determine the best approach.
 - City should own the stormwater basin and promote it as a recreational area.
- The Johnson County Poor Farm is another nearby unique amenity that plans on becoming more integrated with neighborhoods to the south.
 - They have plans for trail connections to the south and some affordable housing.
 - They would like to host more activities and events (festivals, bike rides, summer series, movies, etc.) and provide a different venue than downtown.
- The University has lots of nearby outdoor recreational space; the City should enhance connections for residents and strive to avoid duplication of services where possible.

Other Development Considerations

- There are lots of steep hills, so creative roadway design is needed, though not a concern.
- Topography could be a challenge for sewer lines because the cost of lift stations may limit some developments due to their expense (such as in the southwest part of the subarea).
- Where constructed, lift stations will require a certain level of density to support the cost.
- Form-based development standards are being considered for the area to promote affordability, density, and livability regardless of age or ability.