

## Chapter 1 – Introduction and Planning Background

Earlham is a tight-knit community merely 30 miles west of downtown Des Moines. Ideally situated along “America’s Main Street” just west of the metro, Earlham is poised to grow. People in the community value Earlham’s culture, events, and amenities and have concerns about the future if growth occurs too quickly. Some growth has occurred, but this has not diminished the traditional nature of the community, and the growth in new areas has not left the older areas abandoned. It is with this situation in mind that the leaders of Earlham sought to prepare a comprehensive plan for development through 2040.

### What is a comprehensive plan and what is its purpose?

Comprehensive planning is the coordinated effort to direct change and growth in a community. In fact, the land use and development focus makes a comprehensive plan unique among plans. Planning serves as the objective basis from which to evaluate alternatives for future land utilization and community investment. These decisions are made not only by city officials and planners, but also by citizens. The planning process involves decisions made on three levels:

- Selection of goals and objectives based on a shared vision.
- Identification and evaluation of alternative scenarios and how they might impact the community.
- Creation of policies for the implementation of the goals and objectives.

Many cities have developed without plans to guide growth. Unmonitored or uncoordinated development (past or future) may result in inappropriate and conflicting land use patterns. This often results in an inadequate transportation network, the overloading of utilities, significant housing market changes, inability to capture quality economic opportunities, and depreciating land values. Through planning, these conditions can gradually be corrected and measures may be taken to avoid similar problems in the future. Comprehensive planning provides a general frame of reference for effectively carrying out the function of local city government. The result of planning is a timed methodology in which major community improvements can occur.

### What is the role of the plan?

This plan lays out a vision for the future of Earlham, with emphasis on land within the corporate limits and City-owned property outside of the city. The plan also considers land uses and other issues within two miles of the current city boundaries. The plan identifies issues and opportunities for Earlham’s businesses, land use, infrastructure, public facilities, natural resources, and other amenities. These findings are combined with community input to provide a vision for the city’s future. In addition, a set of action steps focuses on improving the quality of life and making the city more attractive for growth.

In summary, it will serve as a coordinated guide for continued planning and development. The ideas and recommendations outlined within the plan can also be useful when justifying grant funding applications and partnership requests. In short, creating this plan will give the City, local development organizations, and service organizations the opportunity to identify its assets and concerns as well as what is needed to build on those assets and address those concerns.

# Destination 2040

This plan looks twenty years into the future while building upon these attributes. What will Earlham be like 2040? While we are not sure what the future holds, certainly we know that Earlham will be different and hopefully better by following a plan than without undergoing the planning process. As the adage goes, "If we fail to plan, we plan to fail." This simple statement is ominously true in our more complex society, because the lack of planning results too often in haphazard decisions - or indecision - and projects that diminish the fiscal, economic, and social capacity of a community over time. Therefore, the overarching goal of the Earlham Comprehensive Plan is to map out a vision for Earlham in 2040 that will lead to a more vibrant and prosperous community in which as many people as possible work toward a common purpose.

Overall, the Earlham:2040 Plan is designed to:

- Guide future land development, thus leading to a safer, more pleasant, and vibrant economy for agricultural, residential, commercial, industrial, and public activities.
- Promote the public's health, safety, and general welfare.
- Enable agencies, associations, corporations, institutions, and citizens to understand the goals of the City and to plan accordingly.
- Achieve a stable and secure tax base through projects and programs that encourage private investments in the community.
- Guide the development and implementation of land use regulations, such as the zoning ordinance and subdivision regulations.
- Ensure that future city leaders will continue positive community development efforts.

### Authority to Plan

A comprehensive plan promotes the health, safety, and welfare of a community and acts as the legal basis for the development of land use regulations, such as zoning. The statutory purpose is to ensure that decisions made about land use are guided by an established and community-guided long-term plan and are not arbitrary. The Earlham Planning and Zoning Commission, at the discretion of the Earlham City Council, is authorized by Iowa Code Chapter 414 to develop and implement a comprehensive plan for the entire incorporated area of Earlham. The comprehensive plan becomes a legal document upon the City Council's adoption. The development of this plan is a result of an agreement in 2023 between the City and the Southern Iowa Council of Governments. It contains all the planning elements required in the Iowa Code.

### "Smart" Planning

Smart planning is a holistic way of policymaking for the future of a community. It addresses the interrelationships among physical, social, economic, and cultural aspects of the community. Across America planning is being undertaken in different ways, with different planning processes, and using different methods of gaining public involvement. However, a few things are common among all smart plans:

- Extensive public involvement in the planning process.
- A focus on sustainability and economically, socially, environmentally, and fiscally friendly policies.
- Vision statements and policies that are geared to building the interrelationships among the elements of community character.
- A focus on more than just land use, housing, infrastructure, and other physical needs.
- A final product providing for continued review and modification as a living, breathing document.

### Iowa's Smart Planning Legislation

In the spring of 2010, the Iowa Legislature passed the "Iowa Smart Planning Act" to guide the development of local comprehensive plans. Prior to its passage, the Iowa Code had neither defined a comprehensive plan, outlined its process, nor explained its use. The only legislative requirement was that any jurisdiction that codified and enforced zoning must have a comprehensive plan on which the zoning was based. Other than by the courts, there was no interpretation or enforcement of how zoning had to relate to a comprehensive plan. As a result, many Iowa jurisdictions had no or very old plans, though zoning was enforced. Many of the comprehensive plans varied in quality due to widely irregular content. This legislation was an attempt to address the aforementioned issues while at the same time encourage local communities to look to the future.

*The Iowa Smart Planning Principles were signed into law on April 26, 2010, as one of the three primary components of the Iowa Smart Planning Act contained in State Code Chapter 18B; Land Use- Smart Planning. These Principles must be considered and may be applied when local governments and state agencies deliberate all appropriate planning, zoning, development and resource management decisions. Application of these Principles is intended to produce greater economic opportunity, enhance environmental integrity, improve public health outcomes, and safeguard Iowa's exceptional quality of life. Successful integration of the Principles also addresses the need for fair and equitable decision-making regarding the growth of communities, and can produce cost savings regarding the provision of public services.*

*--Smart Planning in Iowa, Rebuild Iowa Office,  
2011*

The Iowa Smart Planning Act codified the following:

- The definition and purpose of the comprehensive plan.
- The smart planning principles that must be considered in the planning process.
- The plan elements that must be considered in the planning process.
- The relationship between planning and implementation methods, including zoning.

The 10 Iowa Smart Planning Principles, which shall be considered as part of the planning process, and which are described in some detail in each planning element chapter, are as follows:

- 1) **COLLABORATION** – Governmental, community, and individual stakeholders, including those outside the jurisdiction are encouraged to be involved and provide comments during the deliberation of planning, zoning, development, and resource management decisions and during implementation of such decisions.
- 2) **EFFICIENCY, TRANSPARENCY, AND CONSISTENCY** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should be undertaken to provide efficient, transparent, and consistent outcomes.
- 3) **CLEAN, RENEWABLE, AND EFFICIENT ENERGY** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should be undertaken to promote clean and renewable energy use and increased energy efficiency.
- 4) **OCCUPATIONAL DIVERSITY** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should promote increased diversity of employment and business opportunities, promote access to education and training, expand entrepreneurial opportunities, and promote the establishment of businesses in locations near existing housing, infrastructure, and transportation.
- 5) **REVITALIZATION** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should facilitate the revitalization of established town centers and neighborhoods by promoting development that conserves land, protects historic resources, promotes pedestrian accessibility, and integrates different uses of property. Remediation and reuse of existing sites, structures, and infrastructure is preferred over new construction in undeveloped areas.
- 6) **HOUSING DIVERSITY** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should encourage diversity in the types of available housing, support the rehabilitation of existing housing, and promote the location of housing near public transportation and employment centers.
- 7) **COMMUNITY CHARACTER** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should promote activities and development that are consistent with the character and architectural style of the community and should respond to local values regarding the physical character of the community.
- 8) **NATURAL RESOURCES AND AGRICULTURAL PROTECTION** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should emphasize protection, preservation, and restoration of natural resources, agricultural land, and cultural and historic landscapes, and should increase the availability of open spaces and recreational facilities.
- 9) **SUSTAINABLE DESIGN** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should promote developments, buildings, and infrastructure that utilize sustainable design and construction standards and conserve natural resources by reducing waste and pollution through the efficient use of land, energy, water, air, and materials.

10) **TRANSPORTATION DIVERSITY** – Planning, zoning, development, and resource management should promote expanded transportation options for residents of the community. Consideration should be given to transportation options that maximize mobility, reduce congestion, conserve fuel and improve air quality.

According to the Act, there are 13 elements that may be included in the plan. These are:

1. Public Participation
2. Issues and Opportunities
3. Land Use
4. Housing
5. Public Infrastructure and Utilities
6. Transportation
7. Economic Development
8. Agriculture and Natural Resources
9. Community Facilities
10. Community Character
11. Hazards
12. Intergovernmental Collaboration
13. Implementation

These elements will form the backbone of the chapters that follow. There are many guidance documents and example plans to help with the planning process. One of these is illustrated here.



### Unique Feature – Lack of Detailed Focus on Infrastructure

Most comprehensive plans have detailed information about existing and planned infrastructure. This issue was discussed early in the planning process. The City of Earlham determined that it have other planning mechanisms focused on that issue and that it was not necessary to focus on items, like water main widths, storm water system capacities, and related topics. The steering committee, when key plan components were presented in April 2024, stated that the plan should still consider this issue in the future land use plan in terms of ensuring that infrastructure could support future growth. The final chapters of this plan accomplish that.

### Plan Design and Layout

The third chapter provides a background and analysis of current conditions. The analysis covers topics found in the Iowa Smart Planning legislation, with a focus on the current issues Earlham faces because of its development to date. Essentially, what is Earlham today and how does its past get us to today, and what does this mean for the future?

The bulk of the Earlham:2040 Plan includes an analysis of the relationships among the ten planning principles and thirteen planning elements outlined by the Iowa Smart Planning Act. In some cases, the relationships are obvious and in other cases there may be very little correlation. These chapters outline the various Smart Planning elements and provides a strategy for the next twenty years in these areas, as well as any other area where analysis of current conditions and public comments found a need for more focus.

The final chapter is a general implementation strategy. Outlined here are the processes and tools that can be utilized to carry out the goals and projects outlined throughout the plan. Also, a series of policies is laid out, which is designed for the City of Earlham to adopt in use for daily and long-term decision-making.

The appendices contain more details on the Smart Planning legislation, public participation results, and plan aids and other resources to help implement the plan.

## Earlham's Comprehensive Planning Process

The following are the main activities that led to the development of the plan in general order from spring 2023 through spring 2024.

### 1: Organize the effort

- Outline the plan objectives and scope of work.
- Conduct work session with city officials, including boards and commissions, and staff.
- Establish a steering committee.
- Prepare the public engagement plan.

### 2: Define the planning context

- Begin data collection.
- Determine what issues are most important through community surveys.
- Analyze initial public data collections results.
- Complete initial fieldwork and mapping.
- Identify and report issues and opportunities related to existing conditions.

### 3: Explore options: converge on a preferred plan

- Conduct a plan kickoff event for the general public.
- Hold focus group meetings for various plan topics, as needed.
- Hold mid-plan public engagement activities.
- Conduct analysis from data collected to date for each topic.
- Prepare alternative land use scenarios.

### 4: Prepare the draft of the plan

- Prepare the first draft of the plan, including implementation strategies.
- Conduct a steering committee meeting to gather comments on the plan.
- Prepare plan revisions.
- Coordinate review of the plan by steering committee, planning and zoning commission, and the city council.
- Conduct final public engagement effort to collect thoughts on the plan.

### 5: Seek approvals and finalize the plan

- Summarize final plan draft changes and submit final draft.
- Seek endorsements from advisory boards, particularly the planning and zoning commission.
- Present plan for public hearing(s).
- Present plan to city council for final approval.
- Finalize plan and deliver final product.

## How to Use this Plan

It is vital to understand that it will only be useful if it is utilized. Below are a few suggestions to help make the plan more useful to public decision-makers, developers, and residents of the community:

- Study and learn the plan.
- Ensure that the goals, objectives, and policies of the plan are considered when making short- and long-term decisions.
- Use the plan as a reference when deliberating issues and problems.
- Implement periodic review efforts. Assure public participation in such reviews.
- Promote the plan by referencing it at council, board, committee, and department meetings, sharing with civic groups, and making it accessible.
- Make the plan available at public meetings and hearings (visible on the desktop).
- Make sure that local officials take advantage of educational and training opportunities about planning issues.
- Generate and maintain a close working relationship between existing area development groups and the Earlham Planning and Zoning Commission, as this commission should be the resident experts on planning, development, and zoning issues.

The preparation of the Earlham:2040 is part of the continuous planning and implementation process. Policy recommendations throughout the plan are available to help guide decision-makers. By law, the City is to consult the plan as it makes development decisions. The recommendations that are made in this document may be modified or supplemented as conditions change, and the City should update the plan as needed.

## Planning Context

The planning context, in short, is how this planning effort fits into the planning history of the City of Earlham and its constituent parts. In other words, how does this plan relate to, build on, or differ from other planning documents. A goal of the comprehensive plan is not to replace other plans but to supplement them. The following table shows basic information about planning efforts in recent years and how they relate to this plan.

**Figure 1.1: Recent Planning Efforts/Documents**

Name or Type of Plan	Year	Leadership	Topics and Features	Status
Earlham Capital Improvements Plan	2012	City, Snyder & Associates	Heavy emphasis on infrastructure and design.	Active
Madison County Heart & Soul – Earlham Component	2015	City, Madison Co. Dev. Corp., Heart & Soul Committee	More vision and action focused, with a series of actions for each community. Addresses quality of life issues.	Active

The CIP was prepared for projects to be implemented beginning in 2012. It included \$16 million in projects related to streets, water system, sanitary sewer system, storm water system, parks, and municipal buildings and equipment. The plan included detailed cost estimates and maps showing the locations of proposed improvements. The plan continues to be referenced and utilized, although only a small percentage of the proposed projects are complete.

The Madison County Heart and Soul initiative is a planning process initiated in 2017 that looks at the quality of life and vision for the future of the county. The project website, hosted by the Madison County Development Group, is <http://www.madisoncountydevelopment.com/madison-county-heart-soul/>. The website includes information and action strategies, including strategies for Earlham specifically. The initiative included a robust survey to gauge local opinion, a report, and tools for future project leaders to move projects forward. Many of the public comments, maintained on a spreadsheet, are consistent with the ideas raised in this plan. The plan continues to be relevant.

In 2020, the committee for the Heart and Soul Earlham project created the following statements.

**Theme: Small Town**

We treasure our small town – family-friendly, neighborly, and welcoming; quiet, safe, and clean – which provides a high quality of life for all ages.

**Theme: Education**

We value our local PK-12 school district for its quality education and community engagement, which supports the future success of our children and youth and enhances our family-centered way of life.

**Theme: Business and Community Connections**

We embrace our small businesses, city services, civic organizations, and churches, which support community connection and values.

**Theme: Community Involvement**

We value leadership and involvement in community efforts and organizations, no matter how large or small, which enhance community cohesiveness and pride.

**Theme: Rural Lifestyle**

We appreciate our agricultural setting and heritage as the foundation for managed, vital growth to preserve and sustain our rural lifestyle.

There are regional planning documents that have some reference to Earlham as well. One of these, the Des Moines Metropolitan Planning Organization's CONNECT Plan, is a regional trail and pedestrian plan. It includes a reference to a proposed or potential trail from north of Earlham into the City. There is no indication that the City of Earlham or any other local individual was involved in that planning process.

Earlham also participates in the Southern Iowa Council of Governments Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), a regional planning document. This plan is general in nature and does not lay out specific strategies for Earlham, although the City submits projects for listing in the plan.

