

## Chapter 2 – Public Participation and Engagement

Public participation is essential to prepare a plan that addresses local needs and has buy-in from the residents, community and business leaders, and voters that will guide Earlham in the future. This chapter summarizes the efforts undertaken in the planning process, during the plan writing stage, and those who participated. Public participation results are fleshed out in more detail in the Appendix.

### Earlham Leader Engagement

To kick off the project, the city clerk arranged a meeting of public leaders, including the mayor, city council members, private sector leaders, and other civic leaders to begin the planning process. This meeting, held on March 9, 2023, was designed to inform leaders about the planning process and begin to learn about what are the most important issues and smart planning elements and principles Earlham should face. Eleven persons attended in person at the city hall and one attended remotely, along with two SICO staff members. The meeting lasted one hour. Topics included:

- Introductions and a discussion of what is a comprehensive plan.
- Discussion of timelines and key steps.
- Creation of a steering committee list – all attendees of the meeting agreed to serve.
- Discussion of planning goals and related questions about issues.
- Discussion of a potential planning area and annexation issues.
- Discussion of recent and ongoing planning.
- Discussion of public participation methods and processes.
- Possible plan name and layout.

Notes were taken for the various talking points and strategies were outlined for the next planning steps. Toward the end of the planning meeting, a brief survey was handed out. The survey was designed to gauge public leaders' interest in the Iowa Smart Planning Principles and Elements. The purpose of this was to help prioritize the scope of the plan's study and effort based on where interest was highest.

Interest was highest in the following 13 Smart Planning Elements:

- Housing
- Land use
- Public infrastructure and utilities
- Agriculture and natural resources
- City facilities
- Community character

Interest was highest in the following 10 Smart Planning Principles:

- Community character
- Collaboration
- Efficiency, transparency, and consistency
- Sustainable design
- Revitalization

## The Purpose of Public Participation

Public involvement can be much more than just community meetings and hearings. Planning can include many kinds of public involvement, both in the initial planning process and during ongoing actions of the City of Earlham and partner organizations. The purpose is to ensure that local leaders and other partners understand the concerns of residents and other stakeholders. Public comments help guide elected officials and local organizations in prioritizing planning efforts and projects.

Public input during the planning process should result in greater consensus in the final product. This should make for more popular future civic decisions and should provide better support in the implementation of decisions if the ideas expressed in the public input efforts are taken seriously. In a small rural community like Earlham, the number of people involved in a given public participation effort may be small; providing several different methods of public input in this plan and in future engagement efforts will gain more diverse segments of the population.

## Steering Committee

Local residents and leaders were invited to participate in a steering committee, whose job it was to assist the planning consultant in the planning process. The tasks of the committee included:

- Helping design the plan in terms of content and visual design.
- Assisting in the plan's naming process.
- Participating in intensive public participation activities.
- Guiding the overall public participation process and developing the community survey.
- Providing information to the consultant for use in the planning process.
- Discussing current conditions, their analysis, and what they mean for the future of Earlham.
- Assisting in the formation of the plan's goals and objectives.
- Promoting the plan and the public participation activities.
- Reviewing the draft plan.
- Recommending changes to the document before presenting it to the planning and zoning commission and city council.

The steering committee members are acknowledged in the Acknowledgments section preceding this plan.

## First Steering Committee Meeting

The first steering committee meeting was held at the city hall on May 16, 2023, with 11 people in attendance. The meeting started with a brief statement about the meeting purpose and goals. Several committee participation exercises followed. The first one was a postcard exercise. A notecard in the format of a postcard was given to all participants. It read: "It is 2040 and you should visit me here in Earlham because..." The participants were asked to give reasons in writing.

Next, a series of notecards were given out with various questions. These included:

- What are the biggest opportunities in Earlham?
- What are the biggest challenges in Earlham?
- What is your one big dream for Earlham?
- What is your one big fear for Earlham?

The third exercise was a request for participants to list five specific actions, issues, projects, policy changes, and programs the City should take. The goal was to gain specific ideas for recommendations to be included in the plan or at least explored.

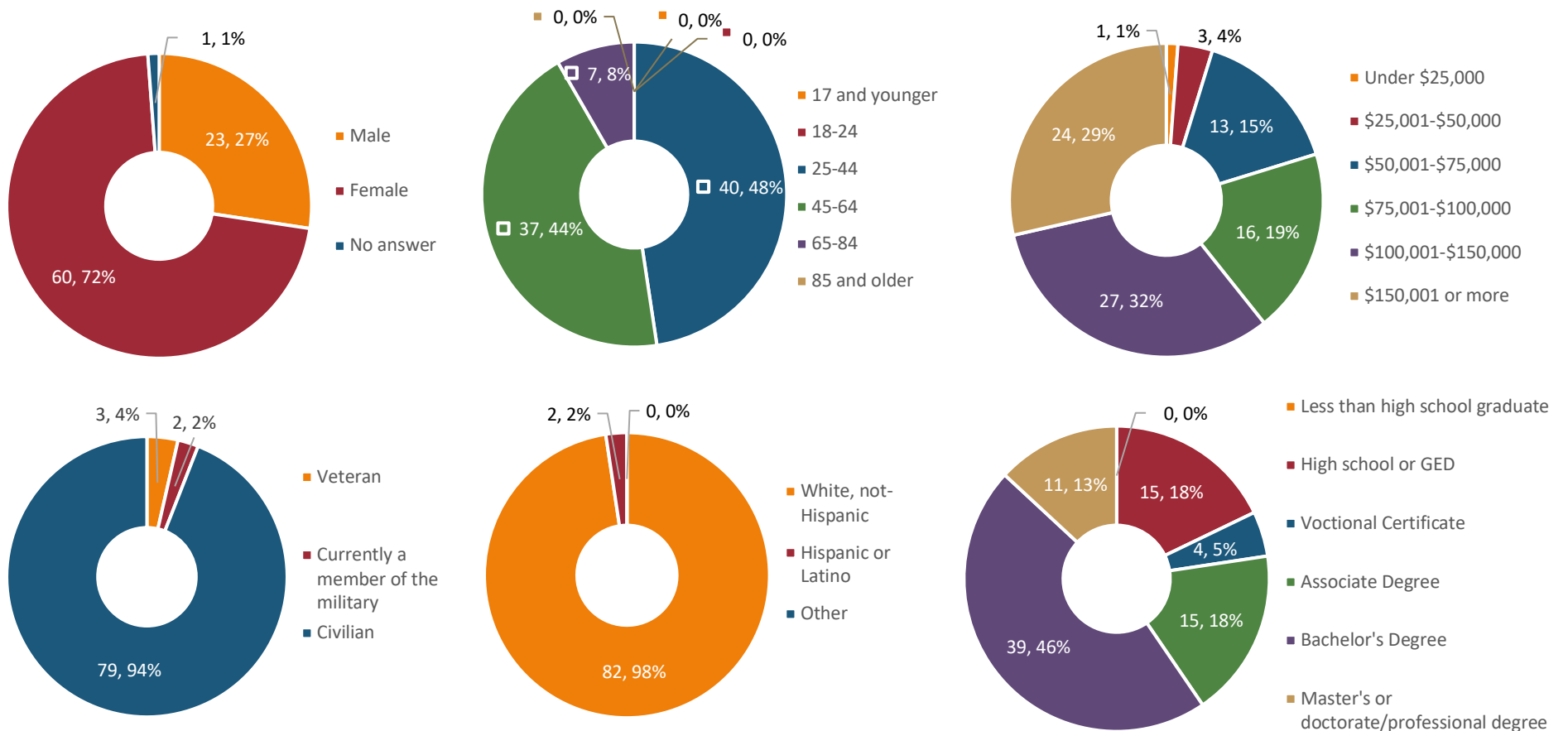


The final effort was the completion of the Wallace Centers of Iowa Smart Communities Scorecard. This looks at somewhat intangible issues related to how well the community works together, practices democracy, grows leaders, etc. Overall, the participants gave Earlham a mediocre C+, illustrating perhaps that public confidence in leadership and the community could be improved.

## Public Opinion Survey

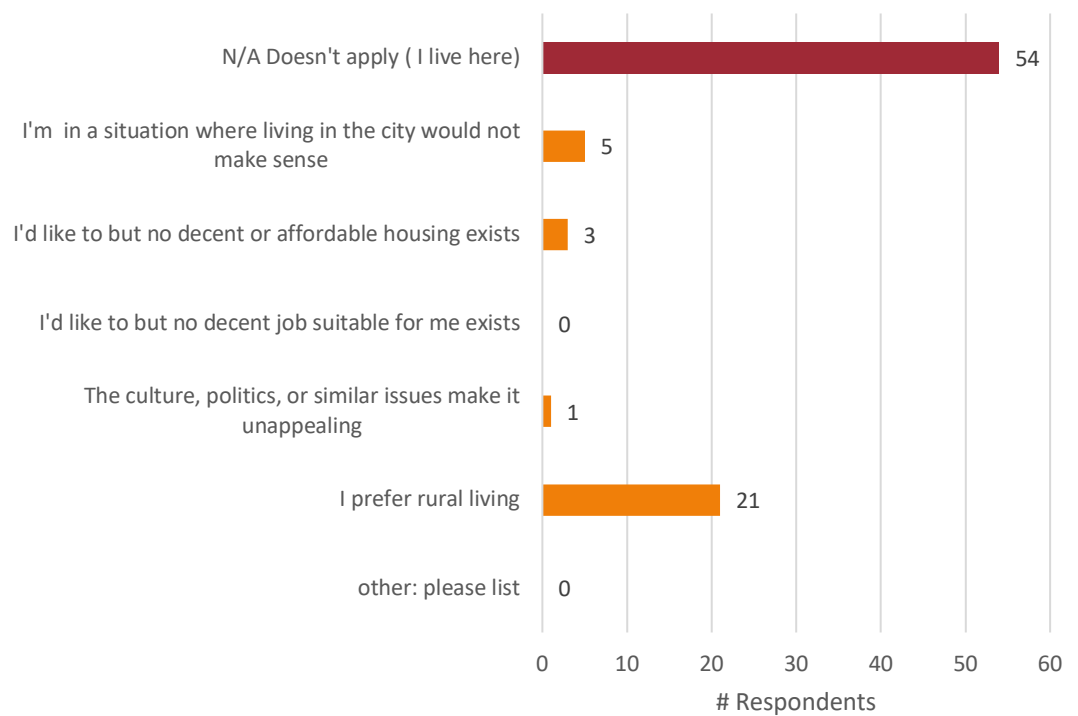
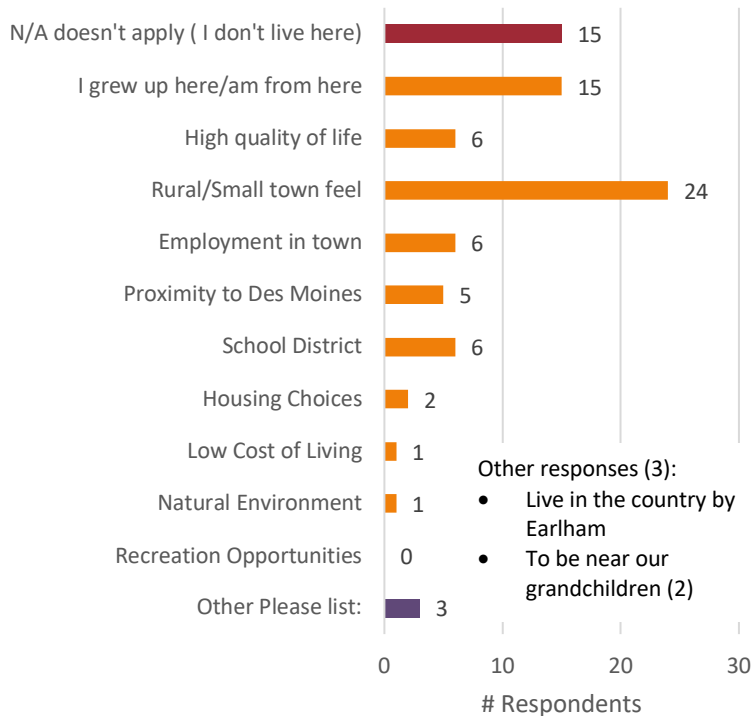
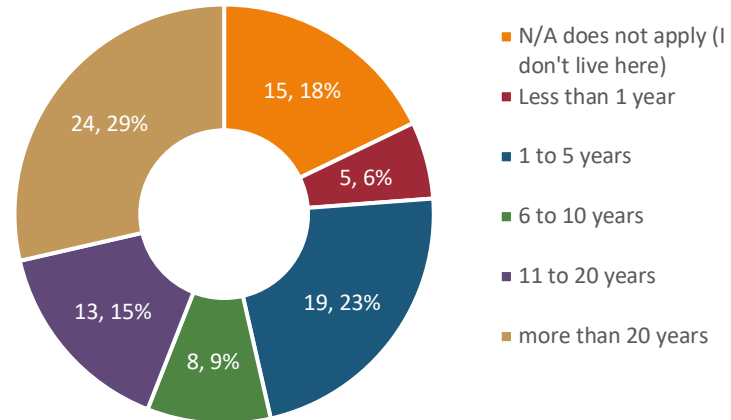
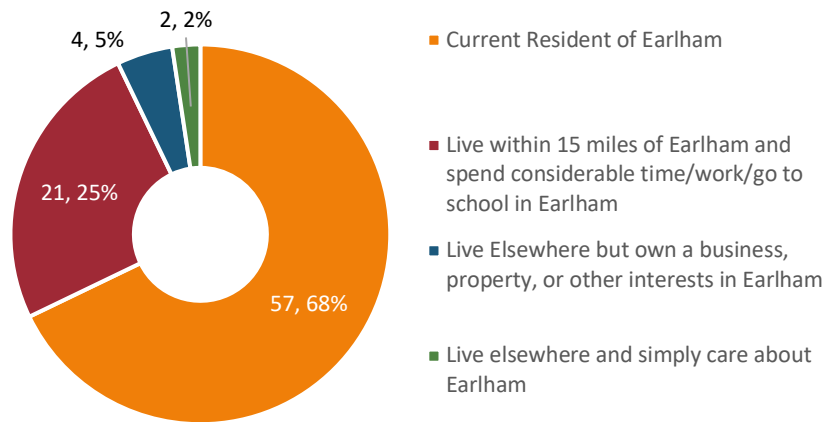
The public was given a chance to provide comments about Earlham and its future. In summer 2023, a paper and online survey containing 39 questions covering many topics was commissioned. The results are in the Appendix. In total, there were 84 responses to the survey. The following figures show some of the basic information from the survey results.

**Figure 2.1: Community Survey Demographic Information**



The survey respondents were mostly middle-aged females with household incomes over \$100,000. Most were not in the military or veterans and nearly all were white. Most were well educated with a bachelor's degree or higher. Unfortunately, it does not appear the survey response reflects a great cross reference of the city's demographic pattern. The general population has more males, a greater range of ages, somewhat lower incomes, and is a bit less educated. The results for the Heart and Soul survey were also skewed the same way compared to the general public, but the Heart & Soul results were not as pronounced as the survey completed as part of this plan.

**Figure 2.2: Community Survey Residence Questions**



The community survey respondents live in and near Earlham, but only 2/3 live in the city. This means that people outside of town care about what happens in the Earlham area. Generally, those who live in town have lived in town for ten years or more, but many living in town for only one to five years also responded. By far the most popular reason for living in Earlham was the rural/small town feel, and the main reason people live outside but near Earlham is because they prefer rural living.

### Community Visioning Session

Once the preliminary review of existing conditions was complete, the preliminary results were shared with the public at a community meeting held October 19, 2023, at the Earlham Community Center. Over 70 people attended this session. Following the review of current conditions, planners at SICOG initiated a few engagement activities or exercises.

The first activity involved the handing out of packets of words. Each group was to work together to create vision statements from the words. They were instructed to add words as needed to make a sentence. The results are in the Appendix. The mock vision statements were used to help create a plan vision statement in Chapter 5.

The second activity was an individual handout. The worksheet asked for two simple statements to be used to guide planners in creating guiding principles, which are explained and listed in Chapter 5. The same worksheet asked for short answers about things like, “Describe Earlham in one word today” and “Describe Earlham in one word in 2040.” The final part of the worksheet asked people to rate six needs and desires in importance. That was designed to guide planners on priorities the community should focus upon, such as trails versus housing. The results are in the Appendix. The following word clouds illustrate question results.

Figure 2.3: Word Cloud of “Describe Earlham TODAY in one Word.”



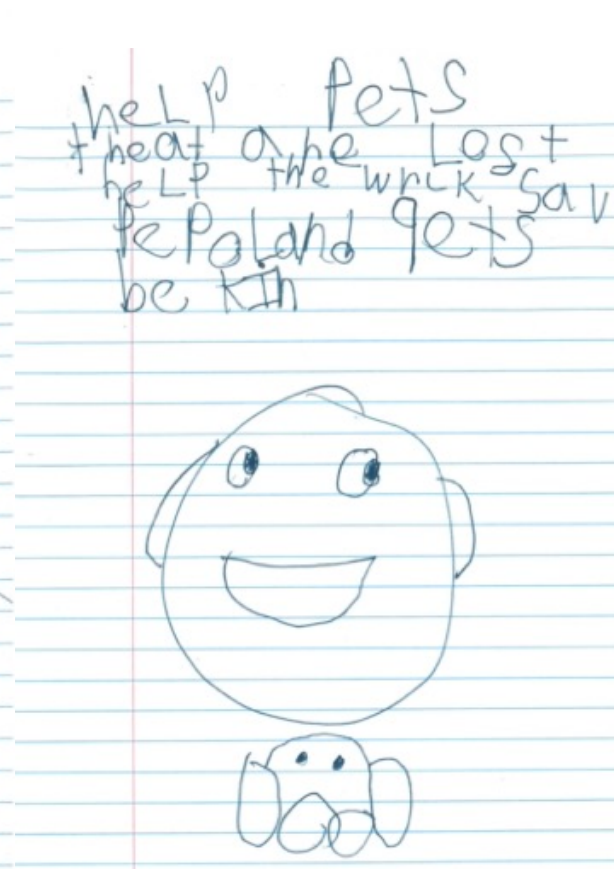
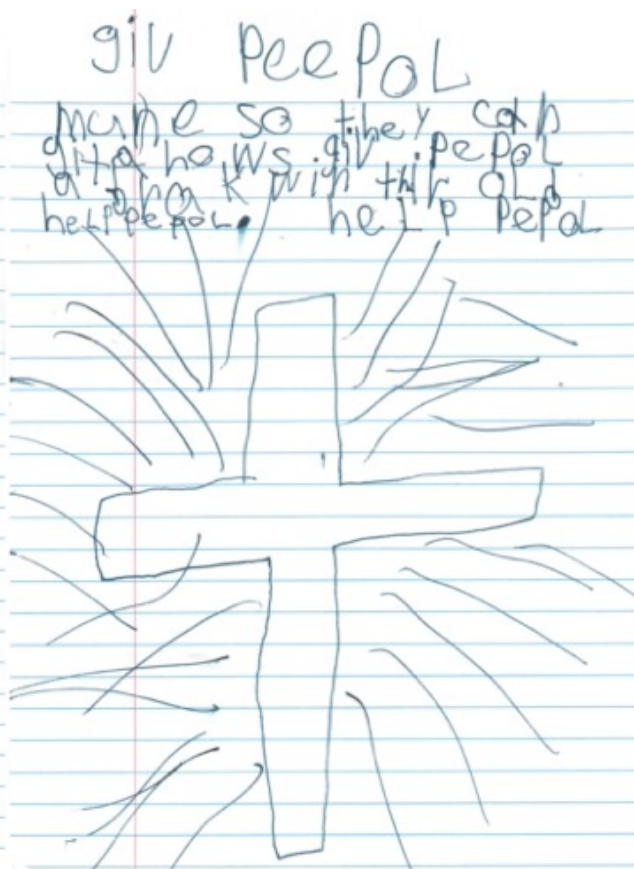
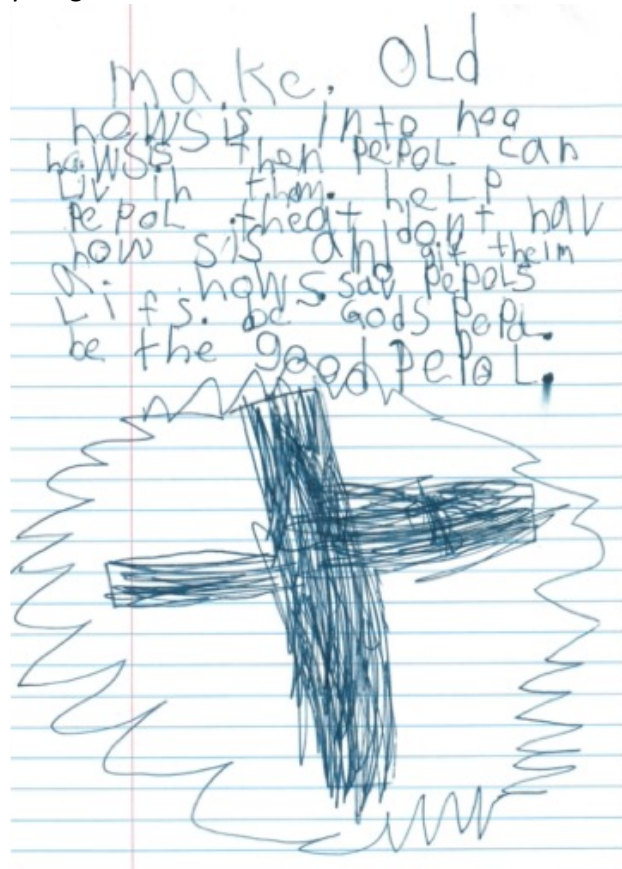
Figure 2.4: Word Cloud of “Describe Earlham in 2040 in one Word.”



The last activity involved various graphics and maps. Participants were asked, before leaving, to go from table to table and give input to two “preference scale” worksheets, a “project type preference” worksheet, two “envision Earlham” visual preference worksheets, and three maps. The maps were of the city, of the planning area, and of Gendler Park. The idea behind the map exercise is to obtain input on the desired future of these areas. The ideas gained from these exercises are used to formulate the future land use map, goals, and projects outlined in the Earlham:2040 chapters of the plan. The results are in the Appendix.



The attendees of the session were of all ages, including a half-dozen youth aged around 5 to 12. The following are some of the ideas written out by one of the youngest attendees.



### Draft Plan Review Meeting

On April 1, 2024, a meeting was held with fourteen members of the steering committee attending. The meeting covered the contents of the draft plan and a description of tasks needed to complete the planning process. A presentation outlined the seven element chapters and the goals in each chapter. A discussion was held following a brief description of each goal and project. Several suggestions for changes were made and are reflected in the final document.

The steering committee and others in the community were then given an opportunity to review the draft plan in May/June 2024. There was a gap in work, when Ryan Marquart of Madison County Development Group shared some ideas for the plan. A follow-up meeting was held in December 2024 to discuss those ideas. Following that meeting, a final draft was composed and submitted to the planning and zoning commission and city council for review, consideration, and adoption, following a public hearing in winter 2025.