

Chapter 6 – Thriving Economy, Downtown, and Community Character:2040

The downtown area is the primary business district of Earlham and should be a vibrant place while the community embraces planned and managed growth of commercial and industrial uses west, north, and perhaps east of the downtown area. Often these topics may be disparate, but they are combined for this plan because the downtown dominates the economic life of the city and it is also a centerpiece for community character, culture, and historic preservation.

This chapter discusses:

- Summary of current conditions from Chapter 3.
- Summary of public input about future economic, downtown, and community character needs and vision.
- Downtown development potential.
- Commercial and industrial development potential of other areas.
- Other community character enhancements.
- Design guidelines and considerations for commercial and industrial spaces and corridors.
- Thriving economy, downtown, and community character goals, polices, and action items.

Summary of Current Conditions

The following matrix itemizes the positive and negative characteristics identified in the background research concerning the topic of this chapter.

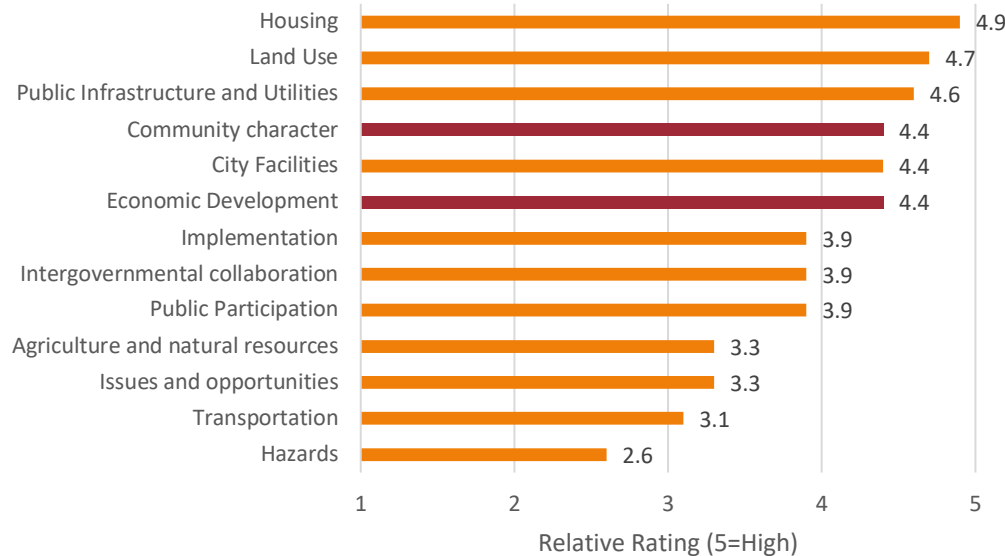
Figure 6.1: Current Conditions Matrix for the Economy, Downtown, and Community Character

Thriving Earlham	Struggling Earlham
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earlham is a quiet and tight-knit town where the values of community are strong. The people are proud of the community and seek to preserve its good character while allowing for some growth consistent with its prominent location. History, culture, education, and a good standard of living are all key values of this character. • The Bricker Price Block’s attractiveness, location, mixed uses, and available space for unique events makes it an important part of Earlham’s community character. • In 2023, the community, under the leadership of the Madison County Historic Preservation Commission, began work toward researching and potentially nominating a part of Earlham as a historic district. The State of Iowa has determined this area is eligible for listing. • Along and north of I-80 in Dallas County are several agrotourism businesses and attractions, most of which are outside of the planning boundary but have an impact on the local economy. • A dramatic increase in taxable retail sales is a very recent phenomenon, as sales had been declining for many years until about 2014. Earlham has outperformed peer cities (small towns in metro counties) in retail sales. • Downtown Earlham contains the bulk of the total businesses located in Earlham, with a few others located on North Chestnut Avenue, near the school. Most of these businesses are small, employing less than ten people. The Earlham School is by far the largest employer with about 100 employees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Far more people travel out of town for work than into town. The conventional wisdom is that Earlham’s housing may be too expensive for the jobs that are found in town but affordable for those who work in the metro. This situation hurts employers, such as the school, that must rely on people who commute to town each day. • A high percentage of people work in finance and other professional fields and virtually no one works in manufacturing. • Earlham has a pull factor or 0.88. In other words, local retailers are not meeting community demand. • The downtown area includes many underused, deteriorated, or unmaintained buildings. • Downtown also has limited defined character – it looks a lot like many other towns.

Summary of Public Input About Economic, Downtown, and Community Character Needs and Vision

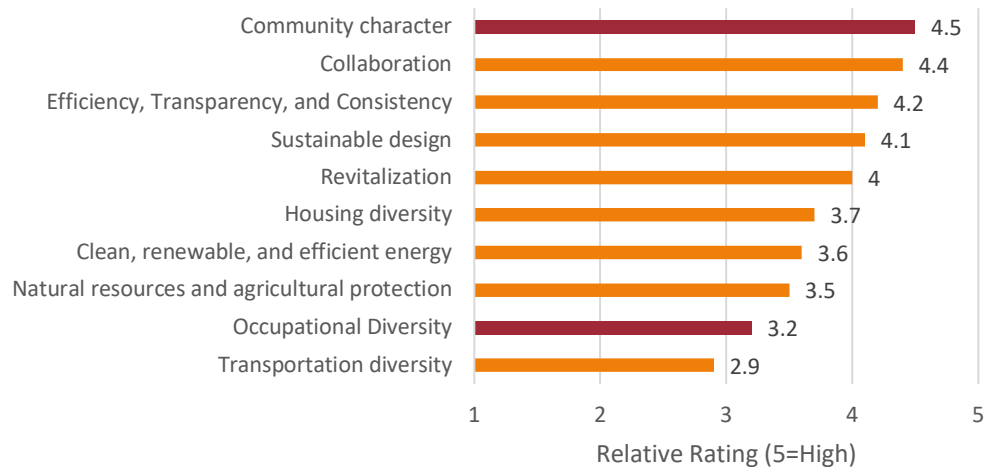
The public is highly concerned about the future of the downtown and about preserving existing businesses. Residents are less concerned about future economic activities other than those specifically desired, such as more eating options. The community character is a central issue.

Figure 6.2: Relative Importance of Iowa Smart Planning 13 Planning Elements According to the Steering Committee



Two planning elements are emphasized in this chapter. Both, highlighted in deep red, are highly important to the steering committee.

Figure 6.3: Relative Importance of Iowa Smart Planning 10 Planning Principles According to the Steering Committee



Two Iowa Smart Planning Principles relate directly to this chapter. “Community Character” is not just a planning element but also a planning principle. This shows how important it is as a centerpiece for the development of the community. The other with a direct tie-in is “Occupational Diversity.” This one calls for a variety of options to ensure that the community is vibrant economically. In summary, a vibrant downtown, with planned and managed development elsewhere, will result in a vibrant community character for a town like Earlham. Community character is seen as the most important principle of the ten, while occupational diversity is of modest or average importance. Other planning principles, such as collaboration, sustainable design, revitalization, and efficiency/transparency/consistency are key to the implementation of goals, actions, and policies related to this topic.

Figure 6.4: Steering Committee Four Questions Exercise Comments Related to the Economy, Downtown, and Community Character

Biggest Opportunities	Biggest Challenges	One Big Dream	One Big Fear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity to Des Moines metro. • Small-town feel or small-town living. • Bedroom community that is NOT just a bedroom community. • Good education system. • Maintaining small-town charm. • Bringing new families into the community. • Opportunity for growth – business and housing. • The great people who live here. • Commercial and residential growth. • Great place to raise a family. • Engage Chestnut St. with businesses to drive street traffic. • Small business support. • Great school and almost every business you need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring land for growth – buildings for new businesses. • Need more businesses and places for businesses. • New businesses opportunities. • Land for expansion/landlocked. • Shared vision of who we are, where we are headed. • Identify and address needs for a healthy (socially, physically, spiritually, financially) community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth while maintaining identity. • A place where people will want to come to visit/shop. • My biggest dream is for Earlham to maintain its small-town charm while accommodating just enough growth to keep the school district and community thriving on its own. • One big dream is that we would function as a vibrant, responsive community with opportunity for all. • “Character” the metro admires. • I want Earlham to be a destination town for families to take roots and raise their family. They do so because the schools are strong, the town is safe, the community is supportive and self-sustaining. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not growing and getting left behind – missing our opportunity. • Losing the businesses we have. • Lack of growth and turning into a dying town. • My biggest fear is that Earlham will be swallowed up by urban sprawl from the east. • Losing the small-town feel. • My biggest fear is that uncoordinated/unplanned sprawl would result in a loss of community and pit neighborhoods and businesses against one another. • That we look like DeSoto. • Growing too fast and losing the small-town environment.

The community survey, which received 84 total responses, outlined several key thoughts related to current conditions in Chapter 3. These are summarized here to help frame discussion about the future of this plan topic.

When asked why people live in Earlham, 24 of 69 respondents living in town like the rural/small-town feel as the main reason. Of those who responded as living outside of Earlham, most of them listed they prefer rural living. In any case, community character and the economy are not reasons for people to leave the city.

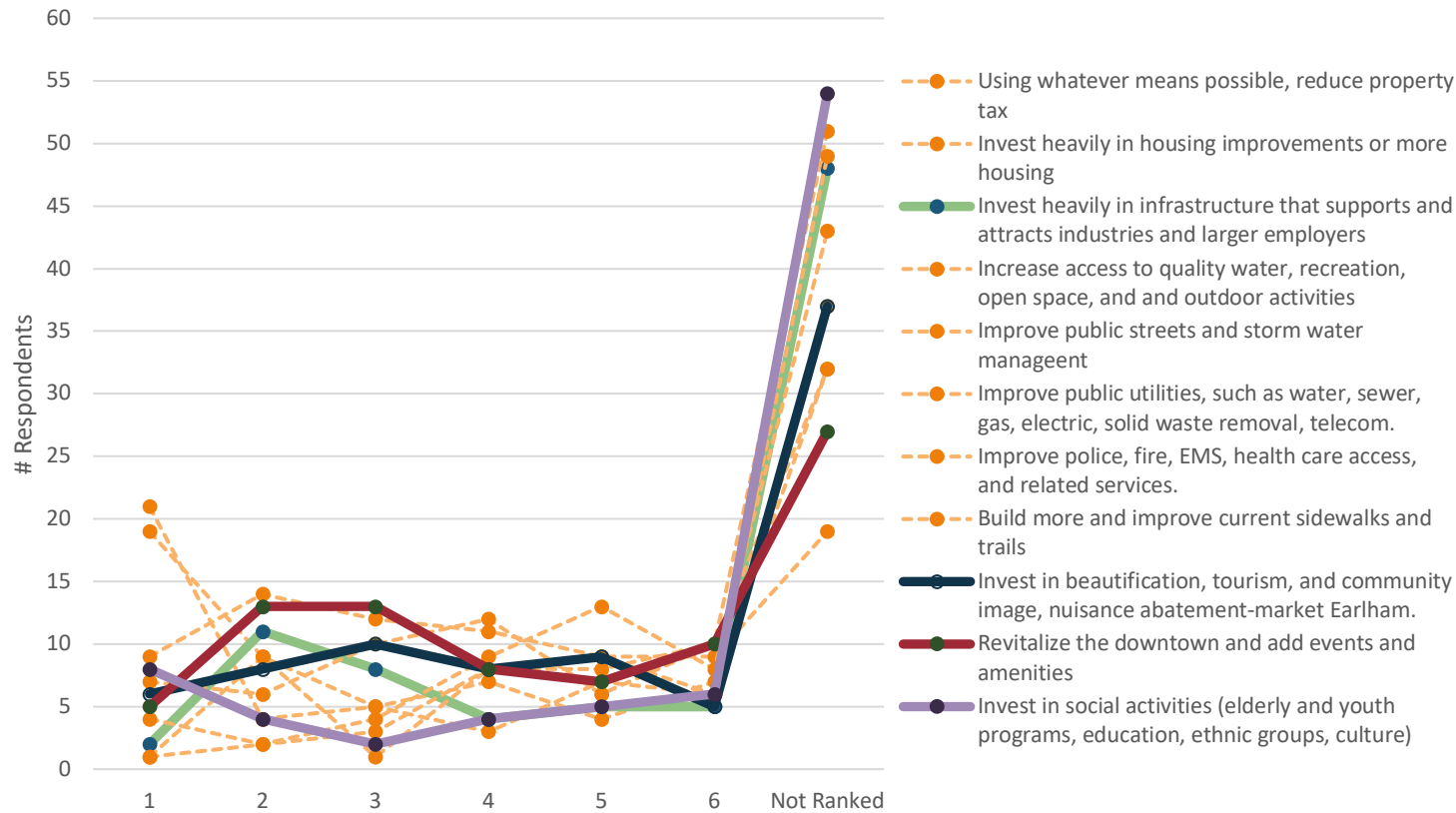
Sixty-one percent of the survey respondents believe that Earlham is “stable,” meaning it is acceptable and will remain acceptable as a place to live and work. Only 14% believe Earlham is “thriving” and the future looks bright. The other 25% are “apprehensive” (23%) or think Earlham is “struggling” (2%). The best survey finding is that only 2% feel that “Earlham’s best days are behind us.”

People believe the downtown is relevant, that design standards should be created and adopted to guide redevelopment, Earlham should prohibit main-floor storefront residential uses, and downtown needs more retail options. Upper story housing and street trees/foliage are also identified needs of a lesser level. A master planning committee is also reasonably popular.

Eighty-three people responded to the question asking about current economic needs in Earlham. The most needed are recreational outlets, such as bowling, sit-down restaurants, and downtown boutiques and similar establishments.

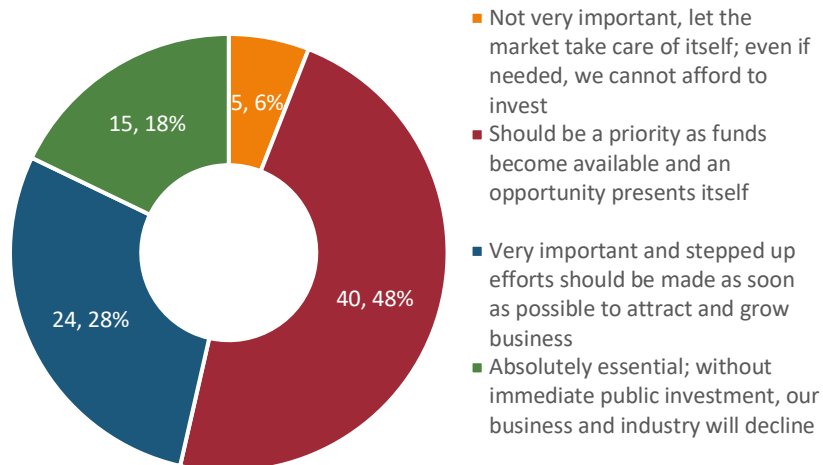
The community survey also asked about *future* economy, downtown, and community character topics, as shown in the following graphics.

Figure 6.5: Community Survey Results: “What Actions Can the City Take to Improve the Quality of Life in Earlham?”



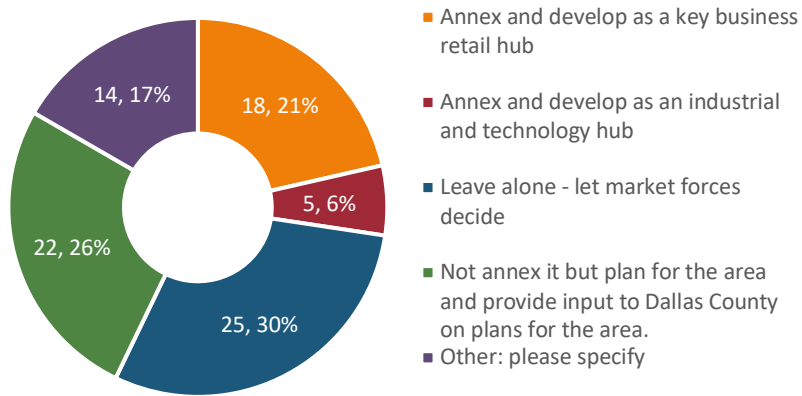
The four items in the survey most closely related to this chapter are shown here is thick solid lines. The most important ones are revitalizing the downtown and investing in beautification, tourism, and community image. Investing heavily in infrastructure to support development and investing in social activities are moderately popular.

Figure 6.6: Community Survey Results: “How Important is it for the City and Partner Organizations to Support Existing and New Businesses and Industry?”



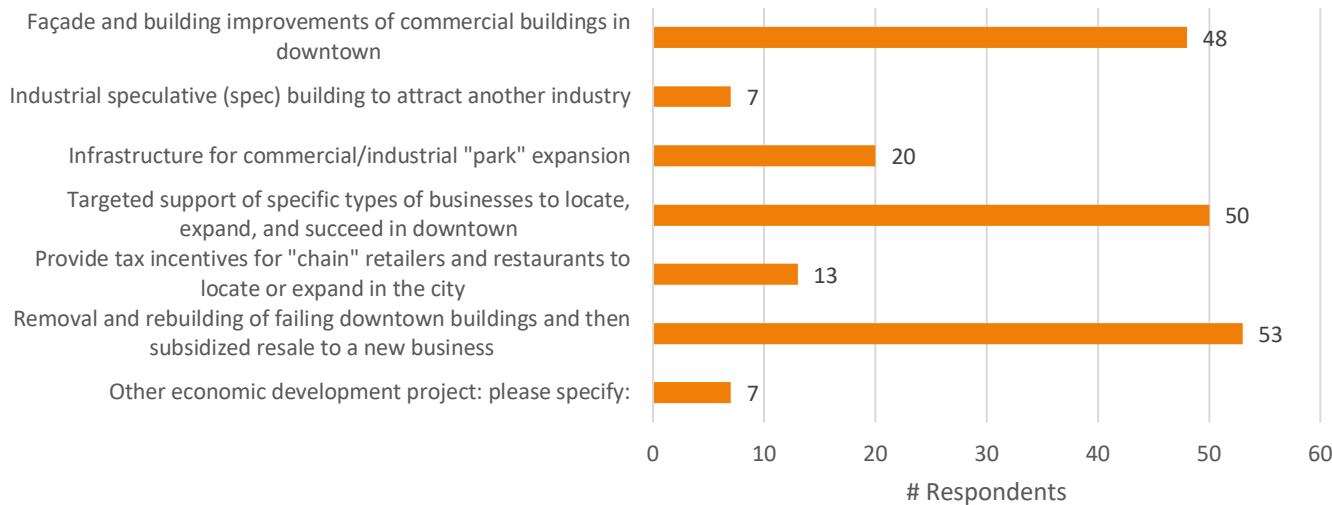
This chart shows that the public is clearly behind some level of planning and investment in economic development. However, most have a moderate level of concern. Only 18% state that investment needs to immediate. The most popular is that investments are not urgent but should be strategic and based on sound planning, not as a response to a sudden or outside threat. In other words, Earlham should be constantly looking for opportunities.

Figure 6.7: Community Survey Results: “What Should Be Done with the Area Around I-80 Exit 104?”



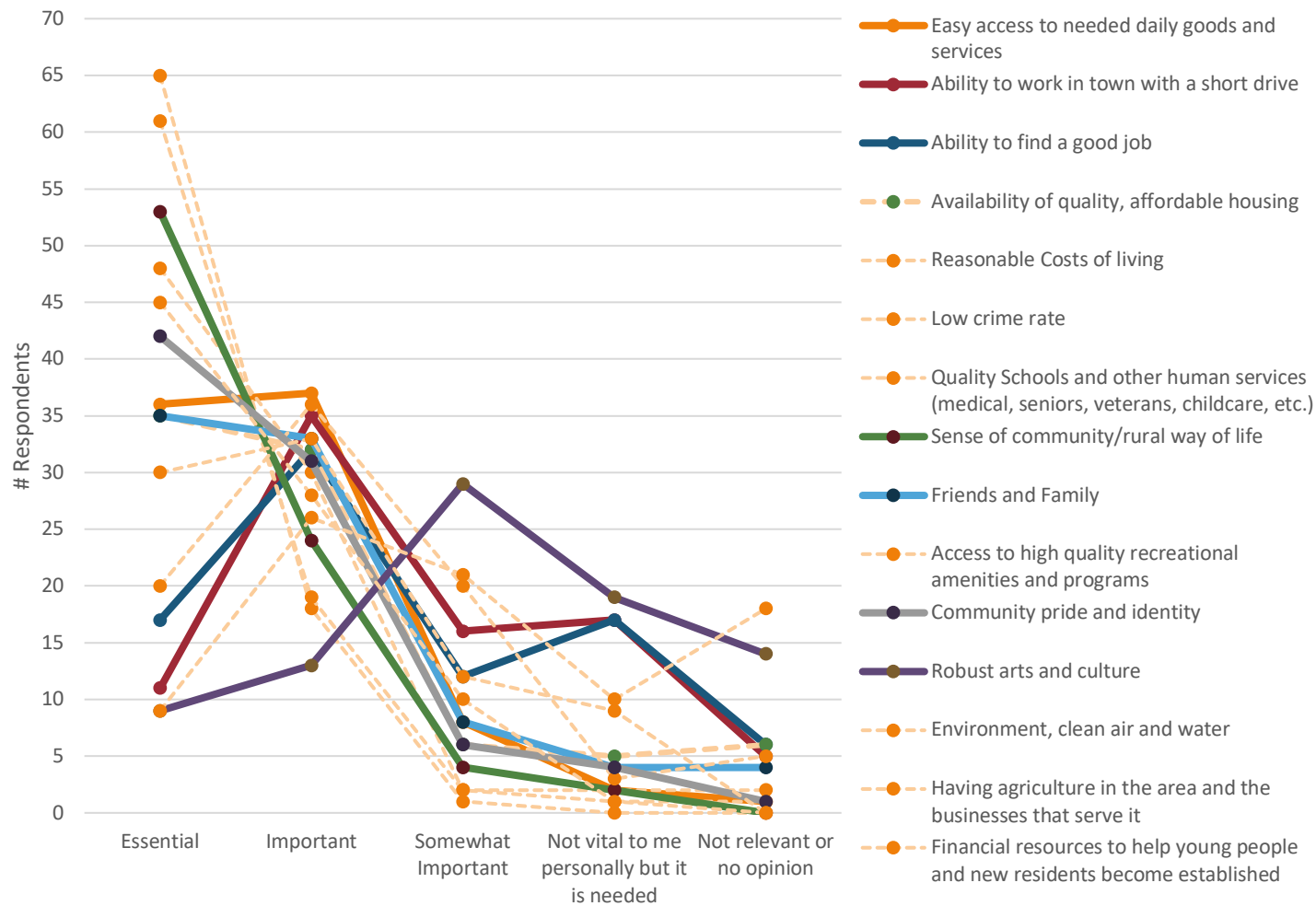
This question is important for this chapter because it pertains to community character, as it is defined or imagined by those coming into town from the interstate highway. The highway corridor from the interstate to downtown is a key area for possible development or an area that should be protected from it. Residents overall are supportive of some action. About 27% wish to see the area annexed and developed into either retail or a tech hub. A further 26% support not annexing the area but completing some planning in the area. Thirty percent state that Earlham should leave the area alone and simply let the private sector develop it as demand grows. Many of the 17% of the “other” comments want it annexed or planned with other or more specific uses. A few of them state that they want it annexed but also left to the private market with no input into the types of development that occur.

Figure 6.8: Community Survey Results: “Would You Likely Support the City of Earlham Investing Public Taxpayer Funds into the Following Projects?”



This question seeks public thoughts on various projects that could incentivize private property and business owners to invest in development, revitalization, or expanded business operations. The greatest support is for removal and rebuilding of failing buildings and then resale to productive use in the downtown area. Second most popular is targeted support directly to businesses in the downtown area. The third most popular option is façade and building improvements in the downtown. Other options received far lower levels of support. Notable these involved investments outside of downtown.

Figure 6.9: Community Survey Results: “In Your Opinion, How Important Are the Following Factors for WHY You Would Want to Live in or Near Earlham?”



This figure shows that many of the priority options are important, and some have a majority of respondents saying they are “essential.” Six of the options have a direct relationship to this plan topic. Sense of community is among the most important of all options, while community pride and identity is just behind it. Easy access to needed daily goods and services and friends and family are highly important. Ability to work in town and ability to find a job are moderately important. Robust arts and culture are seen as somewhat important at best.

Figure 6.10: Survey Respondent Thoughts About Earlham Related to the Economy, Downtown, and Community Character (Number of Responses)

Favorite Thing	Least Favorite Thing	Most Important Places
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural small-town feel (42) • Community activities (16) • People (15) • Community pride (14) • Close to Des Moines/amenities (9) • Services/amenities (9) • Sense of safety (8) • Sense of community (6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everything is closed on Sundays (4) • Not inclusive, political and social environment keeps nontraditional families away (4) • Lack of retail/commercial options and opportunities (3) • Nothing to do indoors during winter months, lack of social events (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grocery store (26) • Downtown (22) • Beans and Beignets/coffee shop (20) • Hardware Hank (16) • Hometown Market (12) • Rescued Junk (RJ Homes) (8) • Pharmacy (7) • Restaurant (7)

Favorite Thing	Least Favorite Thing	Most Important Places
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical Significance (3) • Locally owned businesses. (3) • Self-sufficient community (2) • Potential travel destination (2) • Beans and Beignets (café) (2) • Hardware store (2) • Clean (2) • Hometown feel • Family • Well maintained • Low crime rate • “I love the small-town feel, I feel that can still be achieved even with expansion and growth.” • Shops • Quaint • “It has a charm to be an amazing attraction that people would want to stop and interact with in town. People love small towns that are well taken care of and pretty to look at. I could see Earlham being a destination for people travelling through, which would boost the local economy.” • “The potential it holds. Continue to invest downtown and make it a destination locals and visitors can enjoy. Residential development will follow. Provide jobs for people downtown to keep local dollars in Earlham.” • Downtown • Grocery store • Casey’s is on edge of town. • No other big name brand stores are in town. • “I would encourage us to use Winterset downtown, Dallas Center, or Walnut as examples of what our town could bring to the neighboring area.” • Variety • Proximity to Interstate • Rural opportunities • Slower pace of life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landlocked for growth (2) • Daycare options/childcare (2) • People who want it to stay the same as it always was (2) • Lack of investment in historic downtown (2) • People need to drive to Des Moines or out of Earlham for needs/things to do (2) • Lack of affordable things for teens to do (2) • Reputation for cliques, difficult to feel one belongs in the city (2) • Lack of downtown restaurants • Poor conditions of the downtown area. • Lack of good paying jobs in Earlham • People living in commercial spaces • Few to no non-chain restaurants • Everyone complaining about the car wash in town • Limited dining options • Commercial retailers trying to come in. • Same people buying properties, limits growth. • Lack of CrossFit gym • “People who move to Earlham to get away from the city, but then complain we don’t have enough amenities.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dentist (7) • Retail stores (6) • Dr. Office/clinic (6) • Bricker Price (5) • Professional businesses (5) • West Side (5) • Timberpine Nursery (4) • Casey's (4) • Bank (4) • Heartland Coop (4) • Salons (4) • Harmony Farm (4) • Heirloom Farm (4) • Grade A Gardens (4) • Lillie's Plumbing and Heating (4) • Montrose (3) • EBC (3) • Chiropractor (3) • Gathering spots (2) • The museums (2) • Community events • Vet clinic • Track • E-fit • Daycare • Gym • Bar

What Should Stay the Same?	What Should Change?	What Would Make Earlham a Better Place to Live
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small town feel/rural (25) • Sense of community/involvement/pride (20) • Historic Downtown/district (11) • School support (5) • Low crime/safety (4) • Stay separate from Interstate (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revitalize downtown commercial district, green spaces in downtown (9) • More business, retail options, and restaurants (8) • More opportunities- activity spaces for youth and families (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More local eateries/fast food and family options closer (10) • More local businesses/industry; places to work; "if I could work here" (9) • Even more community events, more things to do/entertainment (all ages), theatre/community playhouse (6) • More things for children to do/places for kids to have options. Recreation options for kids (5) • More retail/opportunities (3)

What Should Stay the Same?	What Should Change?	What Would Make Earlham a Better Place to Live
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No chain stores (3) • Business (3) • Identity (2) • Limit housing developments, can't stay a small town with too much development (2) • Cleanliness, neat, and welcoming, good place to live (2) • Keep trees/add more (2) • Support local (2) • Everything (2) • No dollar store or similar at entrance into town. • "Earlham should not expand for the sake of expansion." • "Keep surrounding areas from overtaking us." • Keep it removed from Des Moines. • No industrial parks • "Town size does not need to double but does need to bring in more businesses." • Historic nature • Keep it quaint • Honor current residents and values • Social events • 4th of July • Music in park on Sunday with vendors • Coffee shop • "I don't think things can stay the same with growth. Everything would need to adapt to what that growth brings." • Nothing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More events, attractions, street dances, downtown activities (3) • Local/city leadership; more open-mindedness to new ideas (3) • Improved community conditions, beautification (2) • More job opportunities (2) • Expansion of community driven businesses and opportunities • Industrial development opportunities, but protect and improve residential areas • "Don't simply attract businesses-support them, shop there." • More investment opportunities and efforts, focus on community vitality • New public spaces • No residing in commercial spaces • More/better gas stations • Limit tax abatement & housing developments before the city's core structures/utilities can handle. • Updating zoning requirements for business districts. • "Don't need tax abatements for new construction." • Need more industry to support more people • Accepting some change • Do all we can to keep town as is, keep out big business." • "Earlham needs to stay small." • "Earlham isn't in need of a makeover." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bowling (3) • Keeping Earlham like it is: small-ish; quaint; not changing; "It's perfect, leave it alone." (3) • More essential businesses (3) with a focus on preserving its past and small-town agricultural feel • Revitalize downtown (2) • More support for our community and small businesses (2) • More childcare options for pre-elementary age kids (2) • Attract the right kinds of businesses to downtown or elsewhere in town for measured growth. • A farmer's market • Dollar General • Pool hall • Having performing arts rent out the school's auditorium for shows. • "People who grew up here being a bit more welcoming to us newbies (and I have been here for 23 years!) Overall, a great place to live though." • "Being especially welcoming to those willing to make our town better, such as the wonderful Bricker - Price Block investment, now a jewel of downtown." • Welcoming spaces • More willingness to accept those who are different from us (non-traditional families) • "Tearing down the Casey's and adding a Kwik Trip" • "Recognize that growth is positive if done properly." • The promise that certain parcels of land will remain agriculture and will not turn into developments (or if developments happen, current residents will have a say opportunity to express their feelings)" • Keeping the city clean • Better customer service outside of town • Being able to own chickens in town • Incentives for current residents, not new buildings • Get more local/ town involvement from all ages. • More diversity • "Any way we could get Lutheran Church of Hope to open a site here?"

As the matrix in Figure 6.10 shows, the public has many ideas about the future of Earlham related to the economy, downtown, and community character. People see lots of good in the city but also many needs. Figure 6.11 repeats the four-question exercise used with the steering committee (Figure 6.4) but with a bigger audience of about 75 people who attended the community forum in October 2023.

Figure 6.11: Community Forum Four Questions Exercise Comments Related to the Economy, Downtown, and Community Character

Biggest Opportunities	Biggest Challenges	One Big Dream	One Big Fear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep an old fashioned culture • Growth/controlled growth • Something for teens/young adults • Bring more businesses in • Downtown area • More jobs • Good growth for housing and businesses • Importance of community • People • Showcasing our strengths • One school/not combined • Small business growth • Historic preservation and tourism • Welcoming community • Using storefronts rather than allowing them to sit empty • Growth from within our community • Young population interested in our community • Self-sustaining 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping our small town • Avoiding moral decay from city sprawl • Lack of building lots • Balanced growth • Space • Population growth for any incoming businesses • Lack of land • Housing, bringing industry • Growing without going boom, like Adel and Waukee with rapid growth and maintain quality of life • Diversity, growth without rapid growth • Truly maintaining small town feel with urban sprawl • To keep growth from ruining what we have • Landlocked with agriculture • Maintaining moderate growth without major disruptions • Where they can grow • Growing responsibly so we are still a smaller town • Keeping businesses/farms locally owned • Expanding with progression • Empty storefronts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain • Staying morally strong and continuing with a sense of community • Lack of building lots • Exceptional lifestyle for all residents • Maintaining close community • Generational longevity • Vibrant downtown • More signage or promotion of what we have • Balanced growth • Balance of quality of life • Stay a small welcoming Iowa town • Grow more commercial space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncontrolled growth, over-development • Earlham growing too big • Development blends into Des Moines • Architecturally unattractive buildings that compete with our current businesses; we have a wonderful grocery store; we have a hardware store well stocked with varied stuff; no Dollar General! • Town dies • Excessive growth • Loss of school, loss of identity • Going “boom” – large class sizes • Losing the small-town community feel • Economic loss by chain retail and services • To keep growth from ruining what we have • Too fast growth so we become like Waukee, pricing everyone out of living here with housing costs and property taxes • No businesses • Not changing with the times • Huge subdivisions/too many “big box” stores

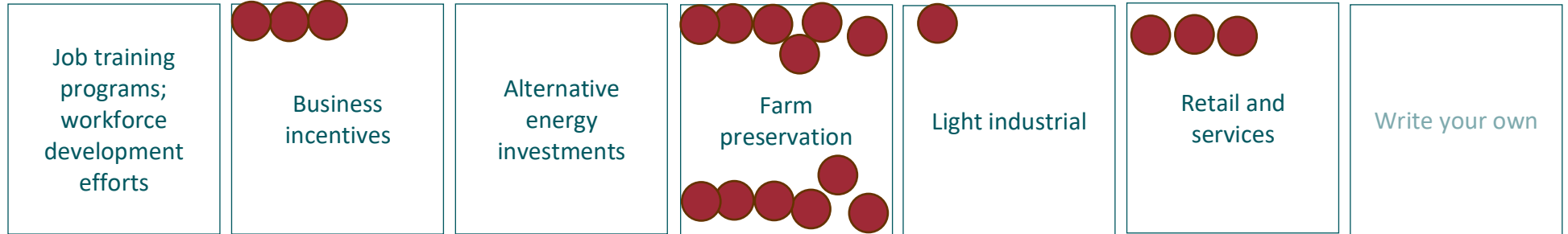
The “opinion casting” exercise used scale bars as another way to gain understanding on where people are on a range of thought concerning a few issues. The following are some of the key findings for about 20 people who participated.

- The group is slightly (55% vs. 45%) opposed to the City of Earlham and other groups activity investing in the downtown.
- The group believes moderately (70%/30%) that entryways and corridors are okay like they are.
- 90% feel that Earlham should limit the use of tax abatement and other incentives.
- The group believes slightly (55% vs. 45%) that incentives should be focused on the latest and best opportunities rather than focused on struggling neighborhoods.
- The group is slightly (55%/45%) in favor of focusing public dollars on quality-of-life items versus infrastructure.

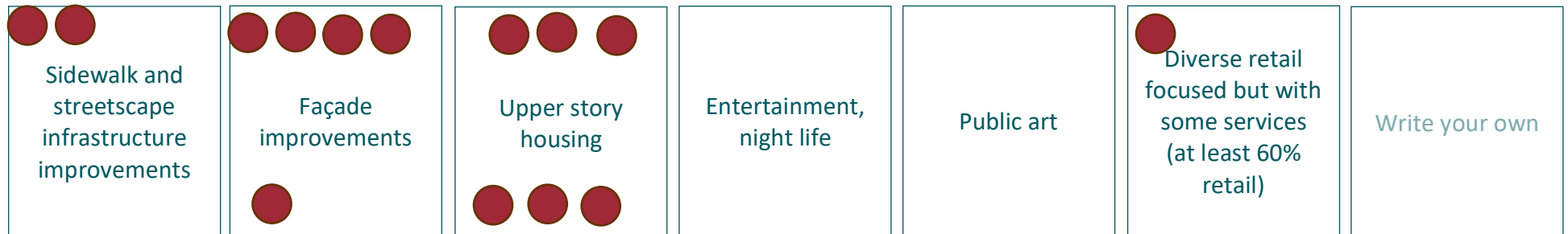
Figure 6.12: Type Preference Exercise Results: Economy and Downtown

Place ONE dot in each column to indicate your preference among the choices for each category. If you want to suggest a different amenity or feature, please write in and place dot on a “write your own” square.

Businesses/Jobs



Downtown



This exercise helps us understand the relative importance of different types of investments in each category. The “business/jobs” category was judged by 20 people, 12 of which said they most support farm preservation. Retail and services and business incentives each had three votes.

In “downtown,” 14 responses were given. For this one, upper story housing received 6 selections and façade improvements received 5 selections.

Since each person was asked to select the top choice in each category (column in graphic), it is possible there is unidentified support for other options.

Figure 6.13: Type Preference Exercise Results: Economy and Downtown

Downtown Revitalization and Streetscapes



Businesses and Development



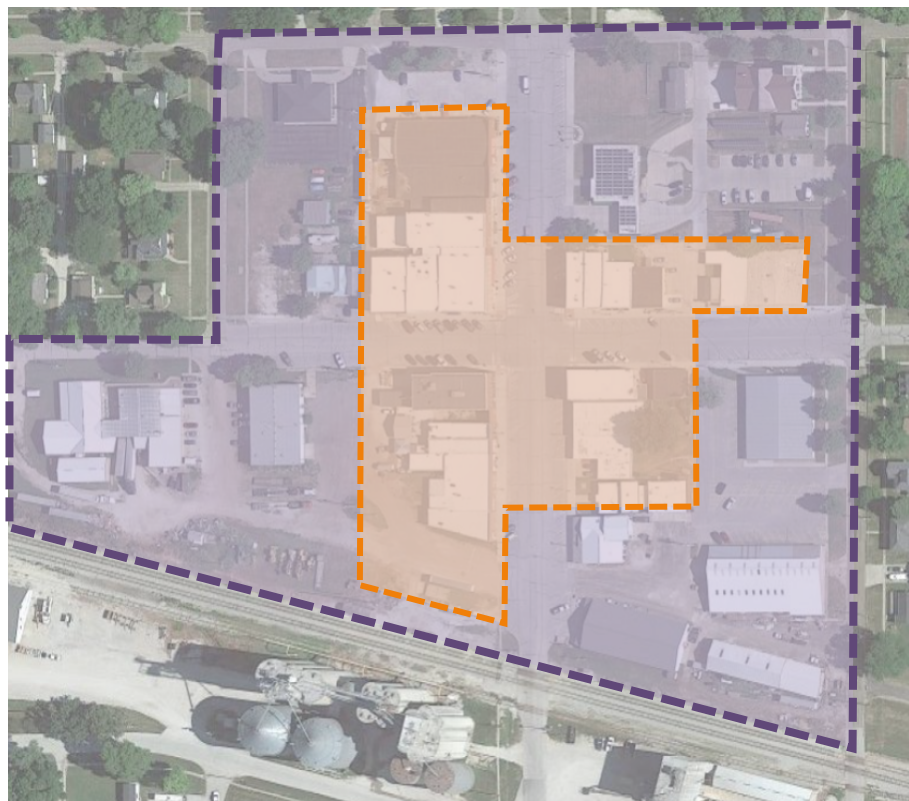
About 20 people participated in the exercise to identify the most desired images for Earlham. One theme is the downtown and streetscapes. The most popular options were traditional downtowns, downtowns with vegetation, and pedestrian areas. The least popular were parking lots, modern urban streetscapes, brick streets, and murals.

The business and development theme generated mostly negative responses to the photos. However, the agriculture, small retail shop, modern industrial/warehouse, and food truck ideas were popular. Fast food, a casino, a large office building, and wind energy systems were the most unpopular.

Downtown Development Potential

As outlined earlier in this chapter, investing in the downtown business community is seen as the most vital economic development effort Earlham should take. Earlham's location and the lack of any large area of commercial development already in progress mean that the potential is great for future commercial and mixed-use development in the downtown area. The following map shows the primary boundary of the downtown in orange, which is the boundary for the proposed historic district, and a secondary boundary in purple. These boundaries can help identify areas of opportunity for short- and long-term reinvestments into Downtown Earlham, such as crosswalks, streetscape plantings, sidewalk improvements, façade improvement programs, and other related improvements.

Figure 6.14: Downtown Earlham



This downtown area is approximately 10 acres in size and includes approximately 50 buildings. About 30% of the buildings have two stories. In this area is 75% of the city's commercial businesses, with a roughly equal mixture of retail/food service and office uses. Approximately 10 buildings are residentially used, with a few that have residential uses on the main floor.

The proposed historic district or primary downtown area includes all the two-story buildings, city hall, library, Bricker-Price Block, and most of the retail establishments. This area is proposed for more detailed planning and investment.

The secondary district includes the fringes. Commercial, industrial, residential, and public uses are found, as well as several parking areas. This area is proposed for secondary investments that will draw people into the heart of the downtown.

In purely economic terms, the focus should be on the downtown area to ensure it is vibrant and meets the growing needs of the area. Without investments in this area, it is more likely that existing businesses and almost any new business will build north of town, as Casey's has done. Because the area is growing, it can support a greater range of offices, such as real estate, health, professional services, and others. It can also support a greater diversity of retail and food service. Many people have called for more recreational or entertainment retail in the public participation process. Perhaps the downtown can support some of these uses.

With investments and marketing, Downtown Earlham has great potential by 2040 and beyond. It may take the kind of effort already demonstrated with the Bricker-Price Block for some buildings to come alive, but the success of that project demonstrates it can be done. Economic growth of four to eight businesses is realistic, along some upper-story housing development.

Investing in and Improving Downtown

What actions should be taken to improve this area to facilitate the types of growth desired by the public? The efforts may vary based on whether we are considering the primary downtown or the secondary district. The following are key improvement suggestions for the next twenty years:

- Façade improvements and building reinvestments.
- Infill redevelopment.

- Streetscape improvements.
- Strategic marketing initiatives.

Façade Improvements and Building Investments

Façade improvements should be targeted the primary district and building interior investments should be considered in all areas. It is vital that building owners, using funds from a range of sources, improve the facades of aging buildings to keep them relevant into this new century and to ensure they survive another one hundred years with the defining character that makes each one unique.

Additional consideration should be given to the interior conditions of various buildings, especially the fire sprinkling and water capacity of the structure. This may require investments in water infrastructure in the area and collaboration among building owners for mutual investment benefit because fire sprinkling equipment can be very expensive. This may be prohibitive in the downtown the size of Earlham with only a few upper story building spaces. However, the main blocks of Chestnut Avenue could become project areas to construct a shared system.

Upper story housing brings life to a downtown after hours and should be part of the redevelopment plan. Issues with parking often result, which can be managed with appropriate ordinances, streetscape design, and additional designated off-street parking.

Once the historic district is listed, the City of Earlham should consider design guidelines specific for the district. The guidelines should be administered by a historic preservation commission and the city council. The guidelines should be optional but any incentives, tax benefits, and program funds should be tied to the use of the guidelines in any façade improvements.

Façade improvements have been completed using building owner, City, and State funding in area towns, including Stuart and Winterset. In 2024, the City of Dexter plans to also complete a program. Earlham would be a good candidate for this program.

Infill Development

Earlham's location and growth potential make it realistic that infill development will occur in the downtown area with appropriate planning and actions. The public supports that a master plan be created for the downtown area. This master plan, headed by a steering committee and drafted by a team of design professionals, could include streetscape and infill development ideas, design standards, and a feasibility study to determine what businesses should be targeted. Mixed-use development is desired throughout the downtown.

Things to consider when evaluating a site for infill development:

- Is the site underused, vacant, or dilapidated?
- Can investment improve the market value of the site or will the market support successful use of the property?
- Is the existing infrastructure adequate to support redevelopment?

These questions should be asked as part of a proactive redevelopment policy pertaining to each building/property in the downtown area. If the City of Earlham and partners wait for a building to become available and even then take no action to reinvest, existing conditions may perpetuate. Hoping the right owner comes along is rarely a good strategy, especially when the public wishes for development to happen in Earlham rather than out by the interstate.

A key goal should be to incorporate new development that meshes with the character of existing buildings and yet meets the design trends of growing suburban area, so that the buildings will be occupied. Within the primary district boundary, buildings should be limited to two stories, consistent with the heights of other buildings. Ordinances and design standards should be geared toward incentives only being used when infill projects match the historic context of the district and neighboring buildings. In the secondary area, more flexibility should be encouraged, including more modern designs.

Streetscape Improvements

Residents also strongly support downtown streetscape improvements. Chestnut Avenue from the north is reasonably attractive but more can be done to draw people south from the school toward downtown. Within downtown the street is rather wide (photo to right). This offers great opportunities to implement streetscape improvements, such as street trees and foliage, a center boulevard, banners, unique parking configurations, bump-outs, wayfinding signage, lighting, and other investments.



Branding and a logo can be used for wayfinding signage, banners, and landscaping all along Chestnut and the block west and east along First Street. Planters and landscaped areas can bring back to life an area today covered by large areas of concrete. Leaders recognize that a quality pedestrian/shopper experience is required today for a commercial area, especially retail, to compete against online and discount big-box retail. Today, Earlham lacks this experience. Sidewalks and crosswalks should be evaluated for potential improvements that may include brick sections, continental style crossings, and street murals. Storm water should be proactively managed.

The public was not supportive of gathering spaces, such as pocket parks, in the downtown area. This is likely because there is adequate space available for gatherings. While new pocket parks are not specifically recommended, gathering spaces should be provided in the public realm, including parklets, benches, and outdoor restaurant seating, given the width of Chestnut Avenue.

Special consideration should be given also to beautifying the Chestnut Avenue interaction with the railroad. This can be accomplished with green space, landscaping, and even repainting/placing a mural on the large grain storage facilities (photo to right).



Strategic Marketing Initiatives

As Earlham grows, greater focus should be placed on marketing its retail and food service options as well as community attractions. This marketing should be traditional (print media, interstate billboard, etc.) and trendy (social media, wayfinding, logo, etc.). To make this work, eventually Earlham should create a chamber of commerce and maybe even a Main Street program. These efforts will help businesses and community leaders better market their shared resources. It should also include jointly planned promotions and events.

The City of Earlham already has a logo, but there is no logo specific to the downtown. The downtown logo should be colorful and vibrant but also tell a story about the city and its downtown.

Iowa Economic Development Authority offers programs and resources for downtowns and for a low cost will come to the city, hold community engagement events, and prepare a follow-up report with more detailed recommendations.

Commercial and Industrial Development Potential of Other Areas

While the public engagement outlined a preference for economic activities in the downtown area, other areas of town and the planning area are suitable for commercial and industrial development. The entire railroad corridor should be considered for light industrial redevelopment and beautification efforts. Small new industries should be encouraged just west and east of the developed part of the city along this corridor, to take advantage of the proximity of Earlham to Des Moines, the interstate, the railroad, and the mining areas southeast of town. No large industrial site is recommended, and all industry should be low-intensity, transportation-oriented, or agriculture-oriented. By 2040, approximately 20 to 40 acres should be considered for this development, in addition to land redeveloped, to support growth to approximately 1,800 persons. The area shown to the right is just west of town between the county road and railroad, which could be suitable for light industrial.



The area just north of the school and near the Casey's store is suitable for small commercial operations that do not fit aesthetically or economically in the downtown area. Residents have diverging views on commercial growth, but it was almost unanimous that big-box chain retailers were not desired, especially on the edge of town. Whatever is developed in this area should be scaled to the community and neighborhood and have a connection to the downtown so that it does not appear new development to the north is replacing the downtown area in importance and value. A total of up to 20 acres of new commercial outside of downtown is warranted to support growth to 1,800. Most of this will provide a greater mixture of job options in a suburban environment. Development near the school and north should be scaled and designed so that it does not discourage continued residential development in that same area.

Consistent with public comments that development should not be too aggressive or impact too much farmland, development should be primarily in the city of Earlham and should occur as the market dictates but with some planning and foresight. Many thought that development of commercial and industrial should be intentional and when opportunities presented themselves but not forced. A large speculative building or industrial/commerce park is not desired. Therefore, affecting some growth management will likely require ordinance changes, easements, and perhaps land acquisition along the highway north of town and near Exit 104, where the public most supports not annexing the area but providing input in planning and regulation. Today, the City has no role in development decisions at Exits 104 or 106.

In summary, the development potential is strong for a mixture of businesses that support the growing needs of Earlham through 2040 but also accommodate needs and desires driven by the close proximity to Des Moines and other markets. In other words, businesses should support those who live and work in town, are retired, and that live in Earlham but work in the metro and yet need access to the metro's commercial amenities while at home. Earlham can become a great destination for a growing number of hybrid workers.

Other Community Character Enhancements

People have strong opinions that Earlham should remain a friendly, welcoming, and united small town with strong community values. It is important that Earlham assess its values every few years and then strive to either protect what brings about those values or change what to bring about more ideal values.

Protecting Earlham's historic buildings and features is a key aspect of this. They should be protected, promoted, and celebrated through media, events, and wayfinding signs.

Events already held in the community are popular for all ages. It was felt that these meet local needs and should be continued and enhanced over time. Residents talk of a desire for more public spaces. The wide Chestnut Avenue in downtown can host many cool events. Other events can intersect both the downtown and city park. Some have mentioned a farmers' market.

Engaging the town related to regional amenities is also warranted. People have mentioned several gardens and agrotourism businesses in the area and the covered bridges. None of these amenities are properly leveraged within Earlham.

A steering committee member mentioned the very appropriate vision: "Character that the metro admires." This is a great thought that can be built into a logo, marketing, and future planning and projects. Earlham will grow if people in Des Moines want to come "out to Earlham" for an evening out or a day of fun. The key is to help them enjoy the sense of community and laid-back lifestyle often missing in the metro. Commercial areas and the downtown can accomplish this, especially with recreational-oriented retail and food options, greenspace, and rustic architecture.

Community image is vital for a town like Earlham, which is so easily accessible to travelers. Residents note that tourism and beautification are important, but few concerted efforts are made in these areas. Earlham needs them to stand out, to get people to get off the interstate, and to motivate people to drive (and someday cycle) west from Des Moines to visit. A sense of place is needed and can be provided through beautification projects that tell people they are in a unique place, one that is not destined to become "just another suburb."

Design Guidelines and Considerations for Commercial and Industrial Spaces and Corridors

Community character is connected so much with commercial and industrial corridors in a town like Earlham. So much of the community's identity to the outside world is what is seen and experienced by those who get off the interstate and come into town. Driving the kind of community image desired by members of the public requires investments in the North Chestnut corridor.

Design guidelines should include/consider:

- What do we want our Chestnut Avenue corridor to look like from town all the way to and around Exit 104?
- How can the development meet the scale of the neighborhood and surrounding land uses?
- What should the corridor look like so that people can be led from one commercial area to another?
- How do we attract people to go beyond the north end of town?
- What building development styles will attract the types of businesses we most need?
- How do we incorporate design guidelines and siting considerations into our city incentive package?
- Do we want to invest in the area around Exit 106 to draw people in that area to come to Gendler Park and on into town?
- How do we use ordinances and incentives (and collaborate with other governmental bodies and landowners) to focus development to the main corridors and within town rather than outside of the city?

Thriving Economy, Downtown, and Community Character Goals, Policies, and Action Items

Several goals, actions, and policies have been created to help local leaders and partners create a thriving economy, downtown, and community character.

Goals are statement of overall vision and intent and which aim to be broad. They serve as categories for action items and policy statements. Action items are specific steps and activities the City of Earlham, its people, and partners should take. Policies are ongoing principles by which the City of Earlham, its people, and partners should adhere when approving new developments or planning future investments.

These goals, policies, and action items were created to further promote the guiding principles of the Earlham Comprehensive Plan.



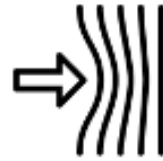
Welcoming Community



Active Lifestyle



Preservation and Culture



Resiliency and Maintenance



Managed Growth



Affordability

Thriving Economy, Downtown, and Community Character Vision

Downtown will thrive with full retail spaces, quality upper story housing, and new buildings befitting of the area, and other commercial and industrial areas will grow with businesses that meet local and traveler needs, leverage the changing economy, and complement the existing built environment.

Goal 1

Create a thriving downtown while preserving its historic character.

Action 1A

Engage Iowa Economic Development Authority to complete a Downtown Walkabout or Assessment; implement key recommendations.

Action 1B

Create a TIF district/urban renewal area to raise financing for downtown improvements.

Action 1C

Create a succession strategy and provide resources to ensure that needed small business can survive ownership transitions.

Action 1D

Create an incentive program focused specifically on specific retail needs and types of businesses most desired.

Action 1E

Create design standards for the primary area of downtown, based on the character of the soon-to-be established historic district.

Action 1F

Utilize the wide Chestnut Street in downtown as the basis for a master streetscape plan that includes foliage, street trees, and other investments.

Action 1G

Create a CDBG-funded building façade grant for the primary downtown area impacting 8 to 12 buildings.

Action 1H

Create an investment program and collaborate with property owners – or acquire from owners – to reinvest and redevelop downtown buildings.

Action 1I

Redevelop or add new buildings on infill lots in the secondary downtown area.

Action 1J

Consider painting a professional mural on the north side of the grain elevators and “sprucing up” the railroad crossing to attract people into downtown.

Policy 1A

Convene community engagement to establish what should be the defining character of the downtown and include in land use decisions.

Policy 1B

Encourage second-story residential office use and prohibit main-floor residential use and use for storage space with no credible business activity.

Policy 1C

Leverage Bricker-Price Block as a catalyst for other development in the downtown.

Policy 1D

Encourage private property owners to collaborate with local government and apply for historic tax credits and grants.

Goal 2

Create secondary business areas that invite people into town and support existing needs.

Action 2A

Create an overarching economic development organization focused on Earlham; continually seek opportunities for long-term development.

Action 2B

Create a small business incubator and coworking space in a downtown building; locate the development group office in this space.

Action 2C

Create a chamber organization; sustain proactive marketing; market Earlham and its relationship with area agrotourism and the famous covered bridges.

Action 2D

Develop and adopt a master plan for wayfinding and N. Chestnut Street corridor design.

Action 2E

Create a secondary commercial area suitable for the scale of Earlham on North Chestnut Street.

Action 2F

Increase the scope of businesses and professional offices to make Earlham attractive for hybrid workers.

Action 2G

Attract a quality hotel or other place(s) for people to lodge that fits the scale of Earlham and that is not the same thing found on other nearby interchanges.

Action 2H

Create a small light industry area west of town near the railroad for agri-based and transportation-based industry.

Policy 2A

Follow the future land use plan (Ch. 12) for proposed developments as they come to the City to encourage organic growth throughout the community.

Policy 2B

Promote the idea that any commercial development outside of downtown is secondary to downtown and that it be town-oriented in design/scale.

Policy 2C

Maintain active collaboration with area farmers and landowners for the eventual development of commercial and industrial sites.

Policy 2D

Use Earlham's status as a great place to raise a family to promote businesses and workers that meet local needs...i.e., teachers, dentists, accountants, etc.

Policy 2E

Be strategic with business incentives and development agreements.

Policy 2F

Monitor development of the Earlham/Winterset/Redfield ring of metro expansion; determine the pace of development desired during that period.

Policy 2G

Use whatever policies possible to ensure that the Exit 104 area is not developed until the "right" opportunity(s) comes along.

Goal 3

Enhance the existing strong community character with more events, activities, and investments focused on downtown and the North Chestnut corridor.

Action 3A

Continue to market, invest in, and improve historical and cultural resources.

Action 3B

Promote Earlham as a place to visit for metro residents with unique events for all ages and during all seasons; promote “coming out to Earlham.”

Action 3C

Continue successful events and activities and expand into all seasons; use Gendler Park as a fun place for winter activities.

Action 3D

Continue to use the existing logo or create a new city logo and use it on all signage, letterhead, media, etc.

Action 3E

Increase activity on Sundays and promote a carefully planned extended night life.

Action 3F

Leverage the width of Chestnut Street and proximity to city park to have street markets, street dances, and other regular events.

Action 3G

Create a “welcoming committee” with gifts of value and events to engage new residents and incorporate them into the community.

Action 3H

Create wayfinding signage and light pole banners to promote key areas of the city; add public art strategically.

Policy 3A

Strive through all policymaking to consider how decisions will affect the small-town charm found today and desired by most residents.

Policy 3B

Identify a theme for the community and design community events around the theme.

Policy 3C

Continue to promote Earlham as a clean and attractive community; engage the public for cleanup events when needed.

Policy 3D

As a policy, engage young people; create a mayor's youth council or similar entity to get young people involved in policymaking.

Policy 3E

Celebrate economic victories (new businesses, long-term successful businesses, etc.) and new events and initiatives that build community character.

Policy 3F

Assess community values at least every five years to see what the public thinks should be the guiding principles of the community.

Chapter 13 is the implementation chapter. It includes a matrix that provides strategies to carry out each goal, action, and policy outlined in this chapter. The matrix also outlines the suggested timeframe for each, the guiding principles impacted, and potential partners that should be involved. It also provides tools and resources to help with the implementation process.