

Summary of the Proposed Earlham Comprehensive Plan 2040

Earlham's city council contracted with the Southern Iowa Council of Governments to prepare a comprehensive plan for the future of the community, with a horizon year of 2040. The plan, completed under the leadership of the planning and zoning commission and with the assistance for a team of volunteer stakeholders, known as the plan's steering committee, worked from winter 2023 through late spring 2024 on a draft plan.

The plan includes the following elements:

- Public engagement activities.
- Background research and analysis.
- Goals and recommended actions and policies.
- A future land use map.
- Incorporation of Iowa's Smart Planning Principles and Elements.

This document is an abridged summary of the plan, intended to give more casual readers a chance to learn about the project and provide beneficial feedback about Earlham's future.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This short chapter outlines the purposes for planning, the process of creating the plan, and a high-level review of the plan's role in the community. It ends with a summary of how this plan builds on previous planning efforts undertaken in the community.

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.

Chapter 2 – Public Participation

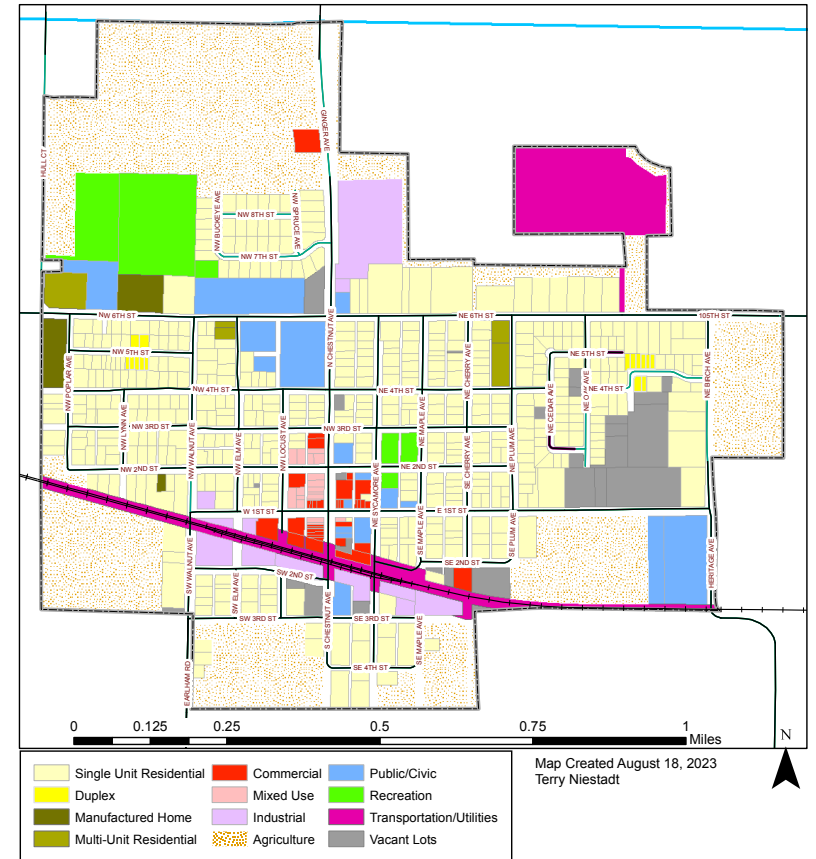
This chapter outlines the public participation/engagement element of the plan. A feature that sets a comprehensive plan apart from many plans is its extensive use of public engagement on a wide range of topics affecting the growth and development of the community. This chapter summarizes the key activities used to gain public input and thoughts about how to use public engagement on an ongoing basis. Some key takeaways are presented. More detailed results from the public engagement efforts are found in the Appendix. To the right is a photo from the large public forum, attended by over 70 people. It is notable that people of all ages attended this forum.



Chapter 3 – Current Conditions

Chapter 3 is by far the largest chapter in the plan. It contains detailed data and analysis about current conditions in the Earlham area. Consistent with traditional comprehensive planning practice, issues and topics raised by the steering committee early on, and the Iowa Smart Planning Elements, the following are key topics analyzed in this chapter.

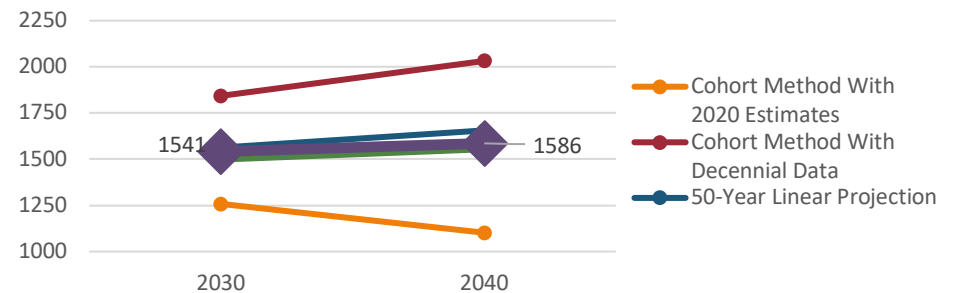
- Community character, including community history, historic and cultural sites, key features of the community, and things that make Earlham unique.
- Physical conditions, such as topography, geography, land cover, floodplains, and other physical features in and near the city.
- Population, demographics, employment, and other data about the people of the community.
- Economic analysis and the viability of downtown.
- Housing conditions and affordability.
- City-owned and partner public facilities and recreation, including analysis of conditions and needs.
- Transportation and other public and partner infrastructure, including analysis of conditions and needs.
- Current land use patterns for the city and the surrounding planning area (see map to right).
- Hazards and environmental issues of concern to Earlham.
- Agricultural and natural resources.
- Fiscal condition of the City of Earlham.



Earlham has many advantages, such as its strategic location, high-quality school system, working-together mentality, desire to preserve historic and cultural assets, presence of the interstate, better than average infrastructure quality compared to many rural Iowa communities, and rapidly increasing housing values. However, the city has glaring disadvantages, such as some aging infrastructure, lack of capacity to grow infrastructure to meet growth demands, the potential for gentrification of long-time fixed-income residents, unaffordable housing, lack of developable infill lots, and an aging downtown building stock with limited momentum in the retail sector. The remaining parts of this plan considers how to build on these and other advantages while proactively addressing challenges within the context of fiscal restraint.

Chapter 4 – Earlham in 2040

This short chapter attempts to project what Earlham will be like in 2040. Given the growth of the city, this is the longest time horizon that should be considered for this plan. The chapter includes population projections (see the chart to the right), an analysis of future needs for facilities, infrastructure, housing, and land uses to meet growth through 2040. The general consensus from the public was that a population of around 1800 by 2040 would be ideal. Much of the future needs analysis is based on this figure. It can be assumed that growth beyond 1800 will require more resources than projected in this chapter, and growth that



does not reach 1800 will require less. This chapter also includes a map of a proposed 2040 planning area (see right). This is not a proposal to annex land but rather is an area where growth associated with the city could or is even likely to occur, and, therefore, the City of Earlham should play a role in planning for that area. We can call this the area which the plan covers.

Chapter 5 – Envisioning Earlham in 2040

This chapter lays out a future vision for the community as it strives to grow and meet future needs. It looks at the background data, potential growth by 2040, and public engagement results to determine what Earlham should look like in 2040. This chapter culminates in a vision statement that attempts to balance growth likely to occur in the area with retaining the good quality of life and sense of community already found in Earlham. This vision is as follows:

Earlham will grow in a sustainable way that enhances its community character of togetherness and that grows a balanced economy that ensures an affordable living.

To carry out the vision statement, the following is a mission statement for Earlham:

The City of Earlham will thrive by focusing on the Comprehensive Plan, use it to create five-year strategic plans and capital improvements plans, and use it to update policies accordingly, all while providing the best possible customer service.

Six guiding principles were also crafted, which will be the basis for future goals, actions, and policies presented in the plan. Ideally, future city of Earlham decisions will positively affect one or more of the following.



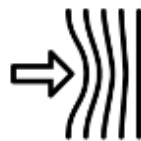
Welcoming Community



Active Lifestyle



Preservation and Culture



Resiliency and Maintenance

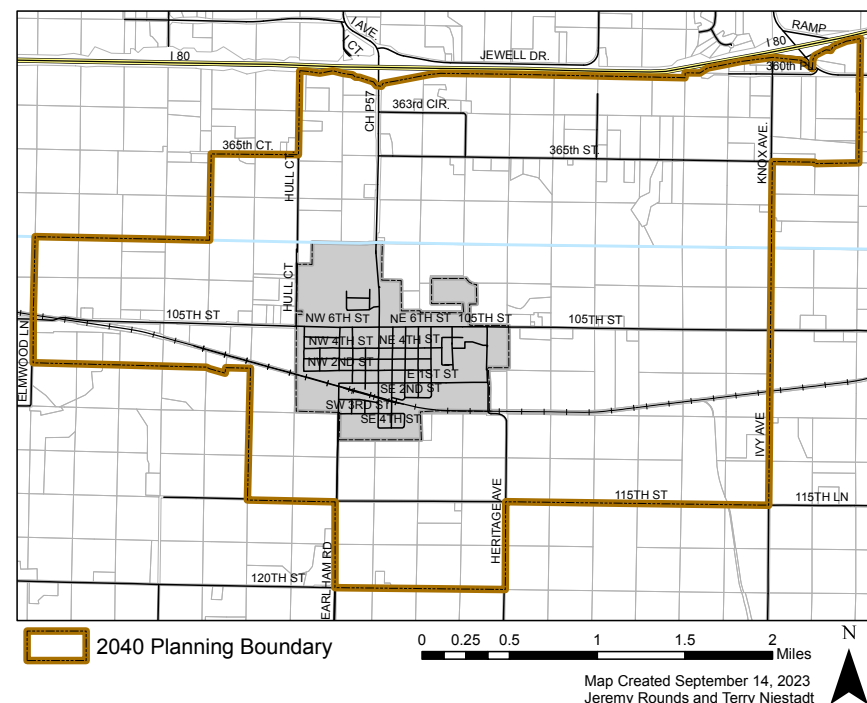


Managed Growth



Affordability

Chapters 6-12 lay out future visions, goals, action items, and policy ideas for various topics in this plan in order facilitate the ideal future in 2040. Each of these chapters includes analysis, maps, ideas, and other data necessary to lead to the vision and activities presented.



Chapter 6 – Thriving Economy, Downtown, and Community Character

Chapter 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.

Earlham's downtown is threatened with irrelevance if suburban growth occurs and no investment is made in this area. Any early priority should be to invest in the downtown. Ten specific actions and four policies are presented. A combination of physical investments and policy focus will result in a more vibrant downtown by 2040.

Goal 2: Create secondary business areas that invite people into town and support existing needs.

Because the town is growing, a railroad passes through town, and development is likely to the north, it is important to have other development areas planned and ideas what should be located in those areas, so that development matches need. Eight specific actions and seven policies are presented that focus on collaboration to stimulate the desired kinds of developments in and near Earlham.

Goal 3: Enhance the existing strong community character with more events, activities, and investments focused on downtown and the North Chestnut corridor.

This goal focuses on an already strong feature of Earlham: its activities, events, and cultural resources. Eight specific actions and six policies are presented to expand and enhance the community character and increase tourism and exposure.

Chapter 7 – Livable and Welcoming Neighborhoods

Chapter vision: *A wide range of housing types and prices will invite people our community needs, such as teachers and small business owners, to live in Earlham, where the housing and neighborhoods will complement the city and ensure a managed rate of growth.*

Goal 1: Promote improved neighborhood conditions and identity.

Housing is a major concern for the city. Consistent with suburban areas, Earlham must balance the growing development pressure and rising housing prices with the risk of the current residents and needed workers (such as teachers) being priced out of Earlham. To address this, and to maintain quality neighborhoods, the City and partners will need to take specific actions while not distorting the housing market. Six specific actions and seven policies include physical investments to sustain quality existing neighborhoods.

Goal 2: Develop approximately 210 new housing units within the city that fit the design of the neighborhood and meet economic needs.

The right kinds of new development are needed, developments that are affordable and of the housing types needed by local residents and workers. Extensive investments are needed to provide for the needs of the community by 2040. Seven actions and five policies are presented, focusing on design of a variety of housing types and sizes.

Goal 3: As much as possible, manage growth in the planning area outside of the city.

Managing growth outside of the city boundary is a challenge, but the City of Earlham should be involved as much as possible. Four specific actions and five policies are suggested to focus collaborative efforts.

Chapter 8 – Robust Recreation

Chapter vision: *Earlham will be a recreational destination with a variety of quality indoor and outdoor recreational options suitable to a growing community, but all investments will be manageable and efficient to maintain for the staff and volunteers available.*

Goal 1: Over time, expand program offerings and events in city parks and recreational areas.

An early goal under this topic should be to continue to enhance programming and work on planning for future recreational needs as the town grows. Four specific actions and three policies encourage collaboration, focused intent, and technology integration into the park and recreation system.

Goal.2: Continue to develop the city park, the city/school recreational/sports complex, and other recreational amenities in town.

The City and partners should focus on continually enhancing the existing parks in the city until they meet most of the local needs. Investments will be necessary over the next fifteen or more years and should be spread out over time. Five specific actions and five policies focus on existing park elements and new items on open space in some park areas.

Goal 3: Enhance Gendler Park into a viable regional park with a more direct connection to the city; expand other recreational options near the city.

Gendler Park should also be a focus in the second half of the planning timeframe, namely after 2030. Five specific actions and five policies are presented to guide the city in the planning and development of this park into a cool regional park while making maintenance costs as modest as possible for city staff and volunteers.

Chapter 9 – Efficient Transportation and Mobility

Chapter vision: *Earlham will have an efficient transportation system that enhances our quality of life, is sustainable, encourages various modes, allows for managed growth, and fits into the neighborhoods and environment in which it operates.*

Goal.1: Continue to proactively manage existing transportation systems and incrementally improve them.

As Earlham grows and traffic increases in the area in general, safety improvements will be required. A short-term goal should be to invest in six actions and four policies to make the road system safer and more efficient.

Goal 2: Offer a range of transportation choices throughout Earlham and the surrounding areas.

Many residents desire trails and past investments show that sidewalks are important to Earlham. Five specific actions and five policies focus on the development of these resources. This goal includes emerging topics, such as EV infrastructure.

Goal 3: Support the capacity of Earlham to grow to 1,800 people and to support the managed growth of surrounding areas.

Future growth will require additional infrastructure. Four actions and five policies are designed to encourage planning and collaboration with county entities and developers to ensure the road network is affordable to build and maintain.

Chapter 10 – Effective and Efficient Public Facilities and Infrastructure

Chapter vision: *Earlham's facilities and infrastructure grow in pace with the development of the city, remain viable and sustainable, and retain great value, while offering great customer service and innovative programming.*

Goal 1: Maintain high quality, transparent, efficient, and consistent public service.

An early goal should be to focus on low-cost actions to make local government as efficient and transparent as possible. Five specific actions and four policies are presented that encourage increased collaboration, engagement, and institutional knowledge.

Goal 2: Over time, improve public facilities so that Earlham has the best quality and most energy efficient facilities possible.

The City of Earlham can save considerable money over time if buildings and equipment are energy efficient. This goal includes six specific actions and five policies, many of which are low-cost, to maximize resources and ensure that public facilities function well while meeting ongoing and evolving needs.

Goal 3: Build and maintain quality and reliable critical infrastructure.

As Earlham grows, new infrastructure is needed. The key is to balance existing and future needs so that the system is not overwhelmed. Collaboration with private utility owners is necessary to ensure appropriate growth. Five actions and six policies guide Earlham in its investments in infrastructure and collaboration with private providers.

Chapter 11 – Strategic Resources Protection and Resiliency

Chapter vision: *Earlham’s resources are protected from premature or unplanned development and the community’s rural way of life is preserved while the community grows. The community is resilient to natural and technological hazards.*

Goal 1: Protect highly productive agricultural areas.

Agriculture is normally a low-priority item for local municipalities, but Earlham should pay attention and remain engaged with how land is used in and near the city, especially due to growth pressure and the desire to retain Earlham’s existing identity. This goal includes five actions and three policies to be considered as these land uses are engaged.

Goal 2: Preserve and enhance natural areas, mineral extraction areas, and green spaces.

Because of the current and previous mineral extraction areas, Earlham has a unique opportunity. The four specific actions and four policies in this goal leverage this and other opportunities in the city and planning area.

Goal 3: Become increasingly resilient to hazards.

As this plan was finalized, the town of Greenfield 30 miles southwest of Earlham, suffered a tornado that destroyed nearly 200 homes. Greenfield will be forever changed. This goal includes five specific actions and four policies the City should pursue to make itself more resilient by preventing hazards when possible, mitigating their effects when they occur, and helping the city recover quickly and appropriately.

Chapter 12 – Thoughtful Land Use and Growth Management

Chapter vision: *Earlham will have ongoing discussions and maintain regular public input on a set of thoughtful strategies to grow in a managed way and retain its small-town character without becoming too exclusive.*

Goal 1: Increase level of knowledge about and attention to planning and land use issues.

The planning and zoning commission should be armchair planners and should be continually educated on planning issues and developing trends that could affect the community. Continued public engagement will help inform leaders about planning needs and may result in amendments to this plan and future plans. The six goals and two policies will help the city be efficient and transparent about planning decisions that affect the growth of Earlham.

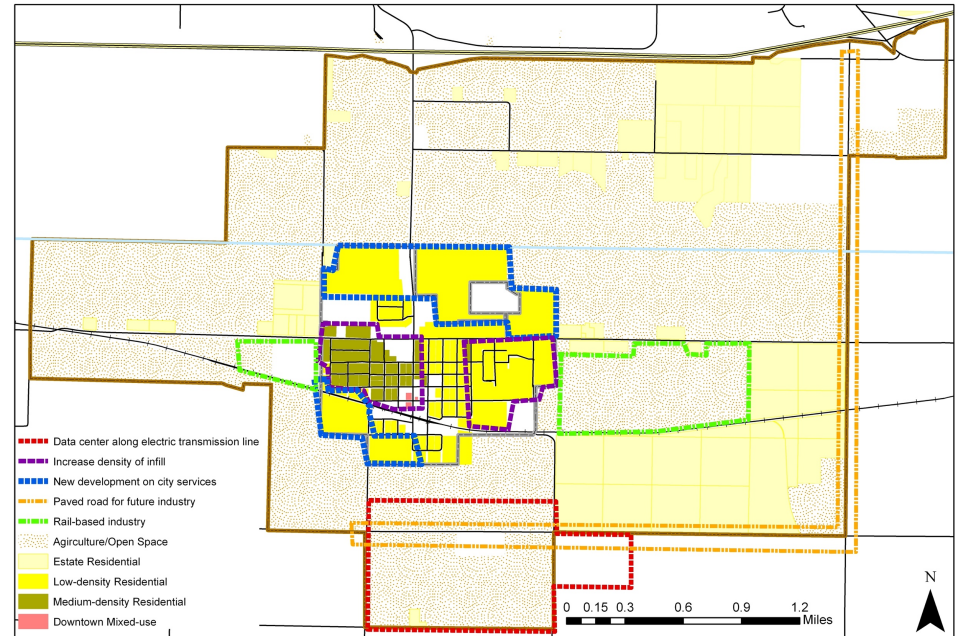
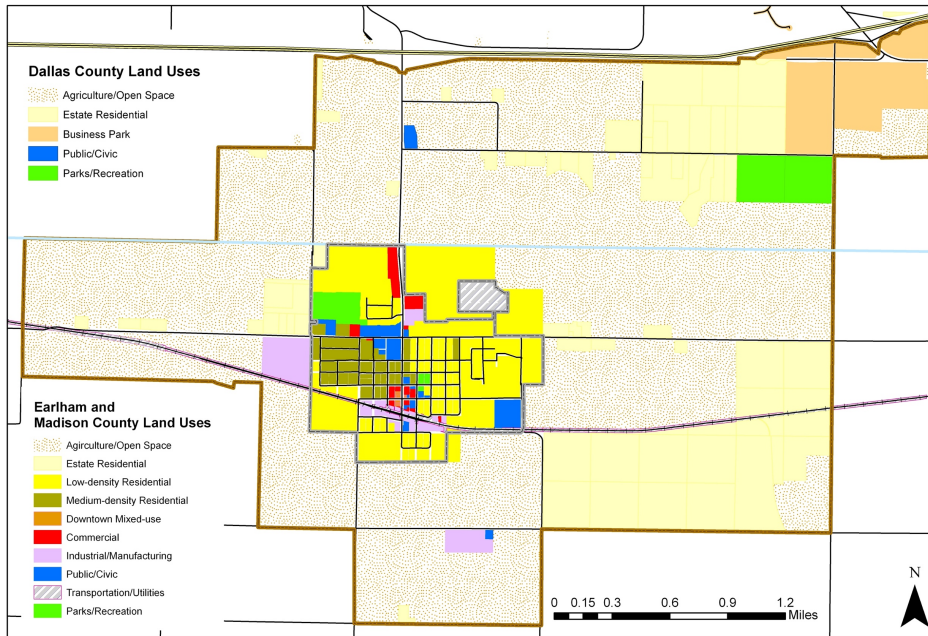
Goal 2: Preserve existing properties and land uses and promote the best land use pattern.

Updates to zoning and other land use policy documents should be based on a thoughtful land use pattern. New development ought to be balanced with revitalization of existing areas to promote equity. Four actions and six policies guide Earlham toward a land use pattern that preserves the ideal quality of life expressed in this plan’s public engagement element.

Goal 3: Make managed growth possible and the kinds of developments most desired simpler to achieve.

While many residents want to retain Earlham as it is, growth is inevitable and is needed to support the local economy. The City and partners should be engaged with developers, landowners, and both county governments when surrounding areas are targeted for new development. Four specific goals and five policies will result in developments that better meet local needs.

The future land use chapter presents two important maps (next page) that should be considered carefully. The map to the left is the future land use map, which shows land uses in the planning area by 2040, if this plan is executed. The map on the right shows development areas that should be considered targeted for either increased density of development or potential conversion to residential or other needed uses. Note that these maps are not proposals for annexation, zoning, condemnation, or eminent domain. They are presented to help local leaders focus discussions about where development should occur over time. The land use chapter provides detailed policies related to design, annexation, and protection of sensitive lands.



Chapter 13 – Implementation

This chapter provides ideas about how to implement the ideas, goals, actions, and policies found in the previous chapters. It includes matrices for the actions/policies listed in this summary but with more detailed information that may be helpful in carrying out each one. It also includes nearly twenty implementation tools available to Earlham and its partners. Some of these include:

- City development tools, such as zoning and annexation.
- Urban renewal and urban revitalization for TIF and tax abatement.
- Special designations and districts, such as historic districts.
- Capital asset management.

This chapter ends with descriptions of implementation ideas to make Earlham more resilient, collaborative, and welcoming. The final pages describe how to use the plan in the daily life of the city through 2040, how and when to update and amend the plan, and how to intersect this plan with existing and future planning efforts undertaken by the city and partners.

In summary, this plan is meant to guide the general planning process for Earlham. This plan is not meant to create an orderly agenda for each project the city wishes to complete. Specific projects that may be covered in detail in other plans should be compared to this comprehensive plan to determine if such projects are consistent with the goals, objectives, and policies of the community and the adopted future land use map.