

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary provides information on the 2020 Comprehensive Plan Update. This Plan updates the 2007 Comprehensive Plan to this current time. Base information, goals and objectives have been reviewed and if relevant, incorporated in this update. This update is ordered similarly to the 2007 plan for ease of review and comparison to see the changes that have taken place in the City of Isanti over a time span of 13 years. Each section of the update contains recent and relevant information in a concise manner, with additional goals providing recommendations for current times and looking forward 10 years to 2030.

Past Economic Conditions Affect Comprehensive Plan Projections

As a review of the document is made, it must be stated that there were two major economic events that affected development within the City of Isanti. These events were the Great Recession and the Housing Foreclosure Crisis. The recession greatly slowed new development and stalled significant job growth for a number of years in the City of Isanti. Coupled with the financial recession was the foreclosure crisis which caused significant abandonment of single family homes in the City of Isanti. Isanti County itself had one of the highest rates of housing foreclosures in Minnesota. At the height of the crisis, 12% of the owner occupied housing stock in the City was affected. The City worked tirelessly with property managers and lending institutions to maintain vacant housing and homes during the crisis. Proactively, the City implemented a federally funded grant program to assist qualifying new owners with financing and repair of foreclosed homes. Over time both the financial and foreclosure crisis eased and with the improving economy, new commercial and housing construction began again. However, with such tumultuous times, the development and growth projections for the City of Isanti in the 2007 plan were not realized. This update takes this into account and provides a new path towards the future.

Planning Boundary / Joint Planning

This update follows the “planning boundary” as described in the 2007 Comprehensive Plan. Overall, planning within this area is sufficient for the time period of this update. It is recommended in development of a new Comprehensive Plan in 2030, that progression of development into the planning area be evaluated and any change in adjacent governmental jurisdictions be taken into account. It is further recommended that joint planning with adjacent Townships, the City of Cambridge, Isanti County and natural resource organizations would assist the City of Isanti to achieve its development goals; with protection of the City’s unique natural environment that extends beyond present and future city boundaries.

Project Process

City staff have worked with the Planning Commission on the 2020 Comprehensive Plan Update. Public input has also been gathered as a part of this update. At the beginning of the process in May, 2019, updated plan Community Vision, Goals and Strategies were prepared and placed on the City Website for public comment. A Facebook poll was also taken at that time to identify community wants and desires. In January, 2020, an Open House was held as part of the regular monthly Planning Commission Meeting to overview the Comprehensive Plan Update and gather public input. Public comment from all these outreach efforts has been included in the Comprehensive Plan Update.

Chapter Highlights

Below are chapter highlights from the 2020 Comprehensive Plan Update. Applicable additional goals are also listed.

Chapter 1: Community Vision, Goals and Strategies

The Chapter contains the City Mission Statement, Community Vision Objectives and overall Goals. Sections with specific goals include: General Community, Intergovernmental Coordination, Community Appearance and Livability, Natural Resources, Growth Management, Land Use, Community Facilities, Parks and Open Space and Transportation. These sections and plan goals should be reviewed periodically. They should also be considered with any Amendments to the Comprehensive Plan, Zoning Ordinance and Community and Economic Development planning and projects.

Chapter 2: The Community

Chapter 2 discusses past and current community conditions and demographics. Demographics regarding population and household trends are reviewed and projections are given through the planning period. Based on analysis of the demographic data the City will continue to grow more diverse in population and the following goals/strategies are as follows:

- Recognize the assets of citizens of all ages, incomes, faiths and cultural heritages.
- Continue to find ways to educate the public on cultural, economic, faith, age-based and other diversity issues.
- Encourage increased interaction and communication between citizens of all ages, faiths, cultural heritages and incomes.

The next section overviews City facilities that include: City Hall, Isanti Community Center, Isanti Indoor Arena, Public Safety Building, Public Works Maintenance Facility and Utility Treatment Plants. There is also information on Schools in Isanti and Churches to recognize them as community social institutions. Goals/strategies for this section are as follows:

- Consider facility planning for future City needs. Identify sites for future public facility locations.
- Create conceptual future master plans for planned growth areas that will identify, map and preserve future utility corridors.

The final section of Chapter 2 is a brief discussion of Intergovernmental Organizations and relationships regarding city growth. Optimal for the City is use of orderly annexation agreements and extra-territorial planning through Tiers. These both allow proper staged planning for future urban development. To gain acceptance and implementation, there will need to be an open dialogue between Isanti Township, Isanti County and the City, with follow through regarding policies as urban development proceeds. Goals/strategies are as follows:

- Work with adjacent Townships, Municipalities and the County to ensure that planning goals, objectives and policies are understood and accepted.
- Communicate and educate local officials regarding City development projects that affect adjacent Townships, Municipalities and the County.
- Work with adjacent local governments to identify areas where collaboration and consolidation could reduce overall cost and increase the effectiveness of local government.

Chapter 3: Housing and Neighborhoods

This Chapter focused on housing development in the City. Housing is the single greatest land use in the City of Isanti. Of that, the largest housing classification in the City is single-family owner occupied housing. People are drawn to Isanti due to its small town feel, semi-rural environment and ability to get single family housing at a lower price point than urban housing markets closer to the twin cities metropolitan area. Regarding the age of housing in the City, the largest amount of housing was built in the time span from 2000 to 2018. There was also a significant amount of housing built in the 1990s. Major housing development in those time periods occurred in the south, western and northwest areas of the City. Also, with the extension of utility and street infrastructure, housing development began on the east side of Highway 65. As residential housing areas are now nearing completion on the west of Highway 65, major housing development will shift to the east side. This is anticipated to happen in the term of this comprehensive plan update. The land use plan recognizes that and land use is guided for housing development in those areas.

Regarding housing type, the demand for single-family housing in Isanti will continue within the timeframe of this update. Market rate starter, transitional, and “move up” single-family housing is being constructed. Recent starter housing is a mix of split level and one level patio homes. The split level homes often have an unfinished lower level, allowing the purchaser to expand the home’s square footage to meet owner housing needs. The single level patio homes appeal to both first time home buyers and senior citizens who need transitional housing. Larger “move-up” single-family homes are being constructed to meet the needs of growing and relocating families.

There is also a need for multi-family housing in the City. The last market rate apartment complex was built in 2008. The most recent housing study, performed in 2015, determined that more housing was needed in the area, as multi-family housing vacancy rates were very low. Since that study more multi-family housing has been built in the area, but not in the City of Isanti. There has been much discussion regarding the need for “life-cycle housing” in the City and multi-family housing fills gaps by providing first housing for younger households and transitional housing for seniors. Part of the issue in Isanti is the amount of land available for multi-family housing. Ideally, these developments are near commercial corridors. Potential sites for mixed use of commercial and multi-family residential have been identified in the updated land use map. It is further recommended that the housing study be updated to assist in defining and verifying current housing needs.

Development of housing subdivisions with natural areas and amenities is important to creating a unique and desirable community. Existing woodland areas, wetlands and wildlife corridors should be retained as a part of development. Public open space to preserve natural amenities, through land donations, easements or partnerships with associations, should be part of the planning process for residential development.

Additional goals/strategies from this Chapter are as follows:

- Continue to study housing goals, needs and resources. Watch for changing housing market conditions and opportunities/projects to meet City housing needs and create life cycle housing choices for residents.
- Create desirable neighborhoods through inclusion of natural amenities, parks, sidewalk and trail systems. Include natural systems in planning so that these amenities and wildlife corridors are maintained.
- Encourage a diversity of housing units through architectural design styles, building placement, density and lot size to create unique neighborhoods in the City.

Chapter 4: The Economy

The City has achieved major economic goals, with location of a Medical Clinic, Pharmacy, and Hotel in the City. There has also been substantial industrial growth, with location of the Ever Cat Biodiesel Facility and SnoBear USA in the Industrial Park. The location of the growing City on a major highway corridor; combined with proactive economic development efforts have assisted in achieving these goals. Commercial development has advanced in business districts on the southeast and southwest sides of the US Highway 65 and Heritage Boulevard (CSAH 5) Intersection.

Employment opportunities have increased in the City since the Great Recession. Overall though, 59% of Isantians in the workforce still commute to jobs outside of the City. Surveys have shown that if local jobs are available at competitive wage rates (factoring in commuting costs), citizens would rather work here. Most workers travel by car to work, with some using carpools. While it is not anticipated that there will be new public transit options by bus or rail in the time period of this update; the City should stay informed of such efforts.

The City needs to continue to be involved and deliberate in economic development to maximize opportunities to gain new industrial and commercial development. In our region there is substantial competition for projects. Commercial and industrial development should be planned to complement existing land uses, natural amenities and growth patterns of the City. Planning efforts to date have placed the City in a good position for near term commercial and industrial growth. The Industrial Park has lots ready for development. Commercial corridors have been developed next to US Highway 65. Commercial lots are available in that corridor that have full access with utilities. More detailed planning for both industrial and commercial areas will need to take place as available lots are developed. The Industrial Park could be expanded to the north and northwest, with a potential for a rail served industrial park. In the next 10 years, there will need to be planned efforts and targeted investment by the City to make development happen.

The City's downtown area serves as the historical center of commercial development. With the synergy of the historic downtown and adjacent mixed residential and commercial uses that extend between Heritage Boulevard and Main Street, from 1st Avenue NW to Highway 65; consideration should be given to expansion of Isanti's definition of "downtown". Street lighting and signage could be installed to further define and identify the expanded downtown district. Development/redevelopment sites could be promoted for mixed use in the redefined district. From a marketing perspective, the area could be marketed together with events and promotions.

Additional goals/strategies from this Chapter are as follows:

- Prepare a new Downtown Plan to incorporate the historic downtown area and adjacent commercial area west of Highway 65 to tie these commercial areas together with specific lighting, signage and transportation improvements for both vehicle, non-motorized and pedestrian usage. Recognize the impact that housing and mixed use in and adjacent to this district has on sustaining the commercial viability of this new “downtown” area.
- Review commercial development needs regarding road and utility systems in the East Highway 65 commercial corridor. Consider if partnerships are necessary for development of this important commercial area. Consider mixed use with possible multi-family developments on parcels located on the east side of the commercial area.
- Look to partnerships with local and regional public entities and private firms to begin steps to develop a rail industrial park.

Chapter 5: Natural Resources

The 2007 Comprehensive Plan recognized the need to preserve and protect the natural resources of the area, including watercourses, wetlands, woodlands and sensitive environmental assets that either are or will be in the future, part of the City.

The City will continue to grow out into these areas over the next 10 years. Depending on land use planning, and how development proceeds, natural areas will be further altered, maintained or possibly enhanced.

Continued sustainability of natural resources remains the key for those systems remaining productive and relevant over time. An example of this would be integration of storm water systems that are designed to absorb, hold and release water, phosphorus and other chemicals in a way not to tax the capacity of receiving waters, which could include brooks, ponds, wetlands, and the Rum River.

The Chapter discusses Conservation Planning as the way to move forward with development in the City with ecological factors as a priority. Zoning tools and development codes can be designed to allow flexibility in development to retain valued natural systems. Conservation planning goals are reviewed which include: enhancement of existing parks and recreation lands, protection of public interest lands, a parks system that incorporates Isanti Brook, Spirit Book, and the Rum River, and Stormwater Management Lands.

Also addressed in the Chapter are areas integral to preservation and improvement of natural systems in the City of Isanti. These are public education, wildlife corridors, City tree/canopy programs, natural planting and stormwater gardens.

Additional goals/strategies from this Chapter are as follows:

- After adoption of the Comprehensive Plan Update, review and update existing land use regulations, storm water regulations and development incentives to guide and support Conservation Planning Goals in land development activities.
- Develop partnerships and work with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Cedar Creek Nature Reserve, Isanti Soil and Water Conservation District, local governments, and volunteer groups to achieve Conservation Planning Goals.
- Educate the public on the importance of Conservation Planning. Work on Outreach Programs with the C-I School District and other groups to get information out to the public.

Chapter 6: Parks, Trails & Open Space

The City has been very proactive in the development of parks and trails. With increasing growth, the City has been involved with development of recreation facilities, active and passive parks, with a variety of amenities and access to natural areas. The parks and recreational facilities operate at neighborhood, city and regional levels. The City has partnered to provide recreational amenities. The Isanti Indoor Arena (BMX) and Academy Park (Arts & Science Charter School) are examples of such partnerships. Future parks will provide additional facilities for residents, as well as continued ties to natural areas and systems. The City has developed trail systems in residential areas of the City, with connection to parks and recreational facilities. Future planning will work to continue incorporating trail corridors with natural areas. The City, Isanti County, Isanti Township and City of Cambridge partnered in development of a joint trail between the two cities. The City is committed to connecting future park facilities and to regional trail systems as opportunities present themselves.

Other recreational facilities that are available in the City include: Sanbrook Golf Course, David C. Johnson Indoor Civic Arena (hockey, civic events), Isanti Firefighters Association Rodeo Grounds (annual rodeo, civic/community events) and Martin's Landing (DNR Rum River access).

Additional goals/strategies from this Chapter are as follows:

- Use the Comprehensive Parks, Trails and Open Space Plan prepared and updated by the Park, Recreation and Culture Board and Comprehensive Plan Chapter 6, Parks, Trails and Open Space when determining the location of future parkland and open space as required by the Park Dedication Ordinance.

- Create an incentive-based program to encourage developers and landowners to complete the network of trails and open space. Look at investments by the City to complete trail segments and connections.
- Provide passive parkland and open space areas to enhance the quality of life in existing and future neighborhoods.
- Plan green space and trails/park areas accordingly so they may become a part of the a larger multi-purpose greenway system in accordance with the Comprehensive Plan, Chapter 5, Natural areas.

Chapter 7: Land Use

The land use chapter is referred to as “the heart of the Comprehensive Plan”. It provides the basis for the Official Zoning Map and is referred to when making findings for approvals to changes in the zoning, subdivision or development codes. It is also used for review of development proposals. In order for the City of Isanti to have guided deliberate development, with proper placement of transportation and utility systems, evaluation and planning for land use is necessary for the future community.

The section overviewed an updated land use inventory and evaluated the “intrinsic suitability” of land uses keeping in mind natural systems and existing land use in the planning boundaries of the City. Many of these areas had already been altered for agricultural, rural residential, recreational or rural commercial uses. These areas and natural systems (as reviewed in Chapter 5, Natural Resources) are included in the future land use plan. Land use designations that define existing and future use of land within the planning area are identified and defined.

Existing growth patterns are also reviewed in this Chapter. At the time of this update, the City is in a growth mode with significant new commercial and residential development. Much of the existing land use planning remains relevant and will continue to be so through the time period of this update. Guidelines for basic planning provisions and physical character of the City are included in this section. City utility system capacities were also reviewed and should also be sufficient for planned growth/service areas in this time period. It is recommended that utility capacities be evaluated again in the next 5 years as growth patterns during this comprehensive plan update’s time period become clear. Utility plant or system updates should include increased capacities if warranted. Utility planning information is included in the Appendix of this comprehensive plan update.

The Future Land Use Map has been reviewed and updated. Future land use designations are also in the plan document.

Additional goals/strategies from this Chapter are as follows;

- Consider goals listed in the Basic Planning Provisions section in reviewing development and redevelopment projects.
- Look for mixed use opportunities for land adjacent to major general commercial corridors and expanded central business district that could include high density multi-family residential.

Chapter 8: Transportation

As recognized in the 2007 Comprehensive Plan, adequate transportation systems in the City are critical to the vitality and growth of the City. The City has two major road corridors that go through it. US Highway 65, is a north/south four lane highway that provides access to the Twin Cities metropolitan area to the south and Heritage Boulevard (Isanti County Highway 5), which provides an east/west highway connection through the County. This Chapter reviewed these major corridor road systems and the interrelation of the City road systems. Roadway jurisdictions and classifications are also reviewed. Besides the major roads, most City streets function either as local streets serving adjacent businesses and residences, or minor collectors which serve to route local traffic to major road systems. The City of Isanti receives assistance for its minor collector road maintenance and rehabilitation costs through MnDOT's municipal state aid road system. Local road systems and their access and use are also reviewed. The existing functional transportation plan was also reviewed. This planning includes roadways and collector street improvements that most likely will be developed beyond the scope of this planning update.

The Chapter also reviewed multi-modal transportation systems that include; the local sidewalk and trail system, regional trail systems, comments on non-motorized traffic crossing of US Highway 65. The section discusses other multi-modal systems that include local bus service, metro bus connection, park and ride facilities and sharing. Included is future potential for commuter rail.

As a final note in this section, it is recommended that collaborative efforts by the City, local and state jurisdictions are continued. This includes multi-modal transportation planning as well.

