

# Town of Normal



## 2040 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN *Community Snapshot & Outreach Report*

Prepared By

McLean County Regional Planning Commission  
115 East Washington St M103  
Bloomington, Illinois 61701

In Cooperation with



April, 2016

The preparation of this report was financed in part through a technical studies grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation: Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration.



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Bloomington-Normal Association of Realtors  
Bloomington-Normal Economic Development Council  
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# **INTRODUCTION & EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

DRAFT APRIL 2016





## INTRODUCTION

The Town of Normal's comprehensive plan was created in the mid-1990s and was last updated in 2006. Much has changed in Normal, Central Illinois, and the world in the intervening years. The region has experienced major population growth and weathered the worst global economic recession since the Great Depression. Technological advances and the shifting lifestyle preferences of demographic groups from Millennials to Baby Boomers have begun to have significant effects on the built environment, as they have in other communities around the country. In light of these and other changes, the Town has opted to create a new comprehensive plan instead of updating its previous plan. The McLean County Regional Planning Commission (MCRPC) was engaged to lead that process.

### REGIONAL CONTEXT

Although this comprehensive plan focuses on the Town, it is vital to remember that Normal functions within a region that includes Bloomington, surrounding communities, and McLean County. Each of these entities relies on the others to achieve shared regional goals through cooperation, collaboration, and collective action. In addition, the fortunes of major institutions and corporations such as Illinois State University, Advocate Bromenn, State Farm and COUNTRY Financial are intertwined with that of the Town and the region.

The BN metro area has many attributes that have contributed to its growth and prosperity throughout its history: its strategic location; transportation connections; major corporate headquarters; and its high quality of life factors; education, parks and recreation, low crime, shopping, dining, cultural opportunities, and many more.

However, we are beginning to face some challenges. Issues such as State Farm's (the top employer in the community) expansion in other markets, the closure of the Mitsubishi plant in 2015, and the fiscal crisis in Illinois are undoubtedly topics of immediate concern for the region. Many of these concerns are being addressed at the regional level through initiatives such as BN Advantage.

### WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

The Illinois Municipal Code (65 ILCS 5) authorizes communities in Illinois to develop comprehensive plans to address long-range growth and development. Comprehensive planning can be an 18- to 36-month-long process, typically including a discussion of existing conditions, community outreach, and a land use plan that identifies goals and objectives with respect to housing, infrastructure, education, recreation, transportation, and other topics that influence land use. While comprehensive planning is primarily focused on the physical development and built form of the community, social, economic, and political considerations are, by necessity, part of the discussion.

Once adopted, a comprehensive plan serves as the primary policy guide for growth and development in communities. The plan is an advisory document, and its goals and objectives are implemented through zoning and other ordinances and codes.

### THE PLANNING PROCESS

In Fall 2015, MCRPC, in consultation and coordination with Town staff, launched PlanIt Normal, a process to create the Town's comprehensive plan with a horizon year of 2040. This 24-month process, graphically illustrated in Figure E.1, contains the following distinct steps:

- 1. Existing Conditions Analysis (*Community Snapshot*):** A detailed assessment of the Town's existing land use patterns, demographic and economic trends, current initiatives, and past plans and studies, this analysis helps identify current strengths and potential future challenges and, more importantly, establish a starting point from which to move forward.
- 2. Community Outreach:** As an overarching strategy for future growth and development, it is critical that the comprehensive plan reflect the community's needs and desires. This step engages residents and stakeholders of various age, income, educational, racial, and ethnic backgrounds to ensure that their perspectives shape the community's vision for the future.
- 3. Visioning:** The data and analysis from the community snapshot and the needs and desires identified during the community outreach

process will provide the framework for a shared community vision and a set of core values that will help shape the Town’s built, economic, social, and natural environments as we move toward 2040. The Visioning Committee, a group of diverse, community-minded individuals appointed by the Mayor, will assist with this process.

4. **Working Groups:** Goals, objectives, and actionable items to implement the shared vision will be established through a number of working group meetings. These groups will be composed of individuals and professionals with expertise in topics such as housing, transportation, energy and air quality. By nature, some groups will work on specific geographies while others will consider county-wide solutions.
5. **The Final Plan** will include elements from the above steps, along with a series of maps

depicting the community’s desired future land use and physical development patterns.

Although these steps are somewhat sequential, it is important to note that each will inform and be informed by the other steps, and also that public feedback will be a key part of the process until the plan’s final adoption. The report documents, such as this one, are designed to be placed in binders specifically to accommodate any suggestions or changes to the content.

### STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

This volume, the *Community Snapshot and Outreach Report*, summarizes the first two steps of the comprehensive planning process. It is organized into the following sections:

- **Community Snapshot:** This section is organized into six interrelated chapters, as outlined in Figure E.2. These chapters analyze the Town’s land

**Figure E.1. Graphical illustration of the planning process**

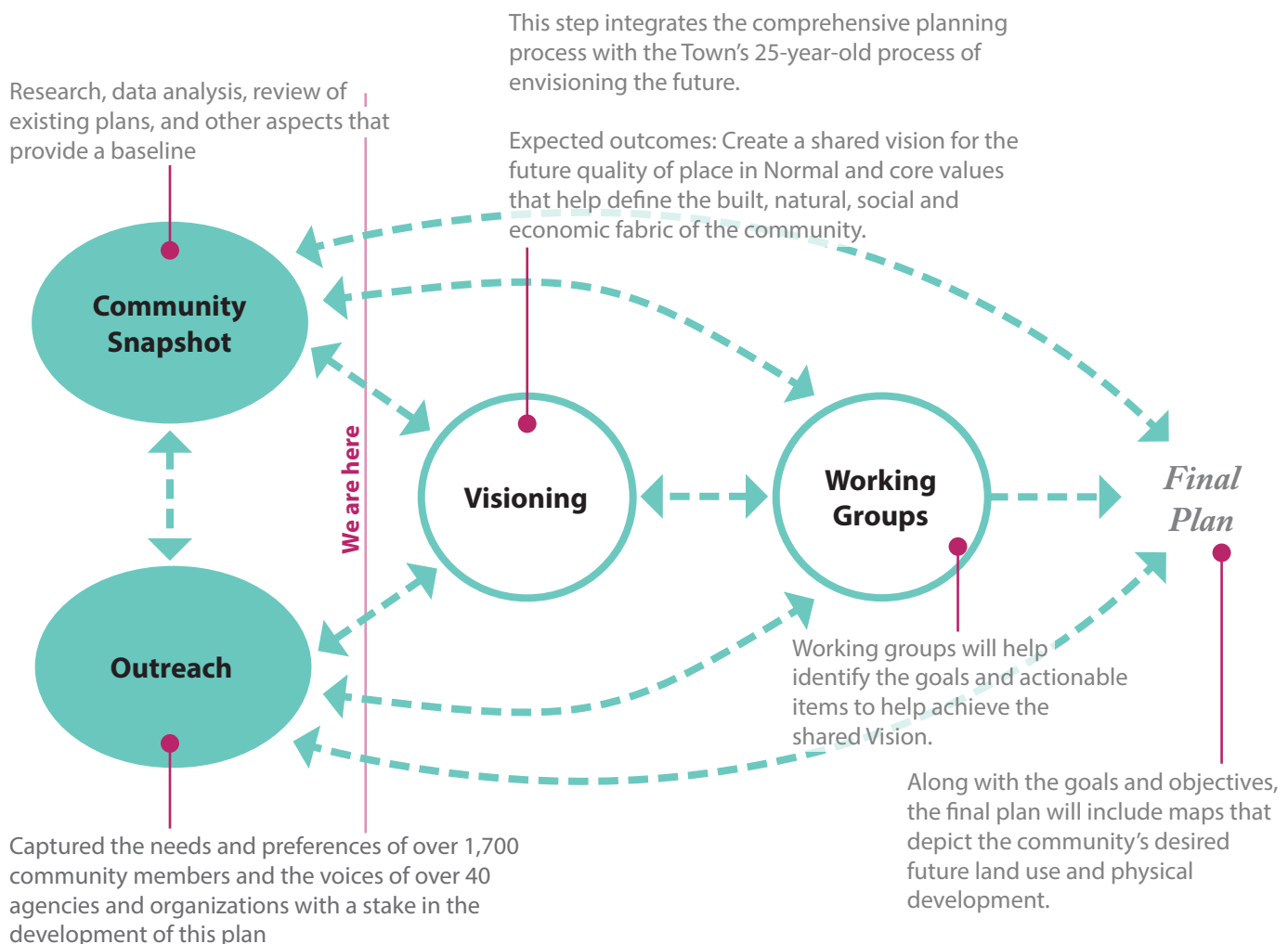




Figure E.2. Report contents



use patterns, demographic trends and future projections, and the impacts of the built environment on health and infrastructure. In the interest of not duplicating efforts, it draws on a number of existing plans and studies. It also includes some discussion of best practices and future trends for the Visioning Committee and Working Groups to consider as they help lay out the blueprint for the future development of Normal.

- *Community Outreach:* This section summarizes the results of an extensive outreach effort conducted over six months. A plethora of traditional and non-traditional methods and scores of meetings with community and neighborhood organizations made it possible to engage a diverse cross-section of the community. This extensive outreach effort resulted in over 1,700 responses to the community survey (shown in Figure E.3) and engaged over 40 key stakeholder groups.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Community Snapshot and Outreach Report* is rich with information, data analysis and observations from residents and stakeholders. This executive summary touches on pivotal findings, chapter by chapter, regarding the Town and its community partners.

**1.1 Growth and Planning History:** Community-wide, the Town exemplified development policy and implementation similar to many American towns over its first 150 years. However, in the new millennium, Normal has achieved a remarkable reinvention. While the primary catalyst was (and is) the redevelopment of Uptown Normal, the Town has applied the principles of smart growth along Main Street and to some extent in newer residential neighborhoods.

- As rapidly as the population grew after 1960 (see Figure E.3), the incorporated area of the Town grew faster, leading to an overall decrease in population density.
- A landmark planning effort in Normal was the 2015 Report, adopted in 1990, which examined the Town's quality of life, impacts of growth and

the importance of developing a more diverse and resilient local economy. The Town's most consequential recent planning effort is the redevelopment of Uptown Normal, applying New Urbanism and Smart Growth principles, which has brought the Town national recognition. These principles are also found in the ongoing Main Street corridor redevelopment.

- Illinois State University has had a significant influence on the formation and growth of the Town. The current economic challenges faced by the Town and the university necessitate a greater level of coordination to achieve a sustainable future for both. In recent years, Normal has dedicated substantial resources to the redevelopment of Uptown and the Main Street corridor, both of which bring great benefits to the university and the broader community. Normal has also accommodated shifts in ISU policy regarding student housing. Mutual commitment to the evolution of the Town-Gown relationship is to the advantage of ISU, the Town, and the broader region.
- Regionalism was an overarching theme of the 2015 Report, which has an assertive discussion of this principle. It called for regional planning, policy development, code standardization, consolidation of government services and a regional approach to growth management. While there are many existing regional cooperation arrangements, both formal and informal, between local governments, regional agencies, for-profit and not-for-profit entities, attempts at increased coordination have stalled. In the current era of fiscal uncertainty at both the local and state levels, heightened regional coordination is necessary to maintain the current quality of place and achieve positive change in the future.

**1.2 Demographics and Projections:** Normal's population is young, well-educated, and affluent, which is one of the greatest economic strengths for the Town and the BN metro area. Despite recent local economic challenges, Normal's population is projected to grow. This projection is in keeping with the Town's strong history of population growth and the metro area's economic strengths.

- Normal's median age is 24 years, median family

income is \$86,851 (well above the state and national averages), and nearly half of its residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

- Normal has nearly equivalent shares of family and non-family households, with 53% percent of the former and 47% of the latter. This unusually high proportion of non-family households can be attributed to the student enrollment at ISU. The student population presents many unique opportunities and challenges to the community.
- While not at the same scale as national trends, Normal's family size is shrinking and its non-student population is slowly aging. These trends are hidden by the disproportionately large population of college-aged residents. As the community grows but ISU enrollment remains stable, these trends will become more pronounced.
- Because of their demographic dominance, Millennials are having a transformative effect on the structure of their communities. As young adults, they have shown preferences for mixed-use neighborhoods, multimodal accessibility, and other urban amenities. Aging Baby Boomers are drawn to the cultural and educational amenities of college communities. Both of these factors are and will continue to impact

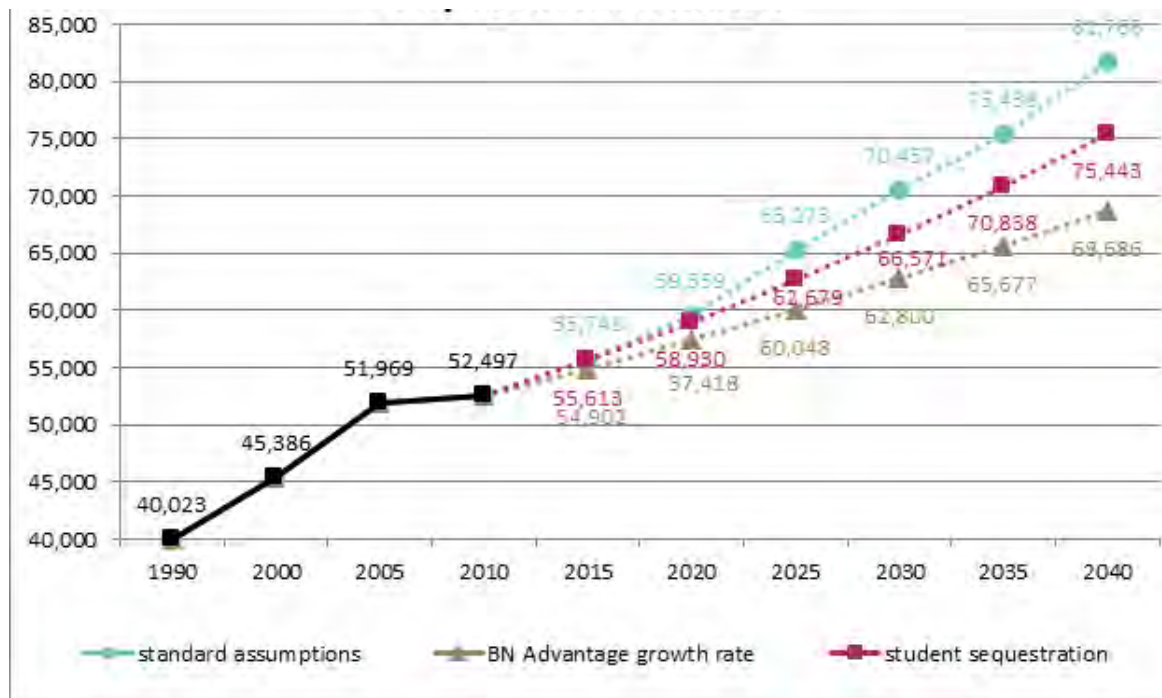
Normal.

- With more than 85% of the Town's population identifying as white, Normal's demographic composition is less ethnically and racially diverse than Illinois' or the nation's. The share of residents identifying as Hispanic is approximately 4.1%, far below the state and national share. Within the Hispanic population, over 60% identify as white.

**1.3 Land Use and Development:** There has been a significant shift in Normal's land use philosophy since the adoption of the Downtown Redevelopment Plan (now Uptown) in 2001. The Town embraced the principles of smart growth for the Uptown project. With major portions of the plan now implemented, Uptown is a model for smart growth and has earned the Town national recognition. Since then, the Town has used innovative regulatory tools and economic incentives to promote mixed-use redevelopment along Main Street.

- Broadly speaking, the Town's land use pattern is similar to that of any community. Residential use, the largest land use category, consumes 36% of total acreage. Nearly 70% of residential acreage is occupied by low-density, single-family detached housing, which accounts for only 40% of all housing units. Such low-density

**Figure E.3. Population projection scenarios**



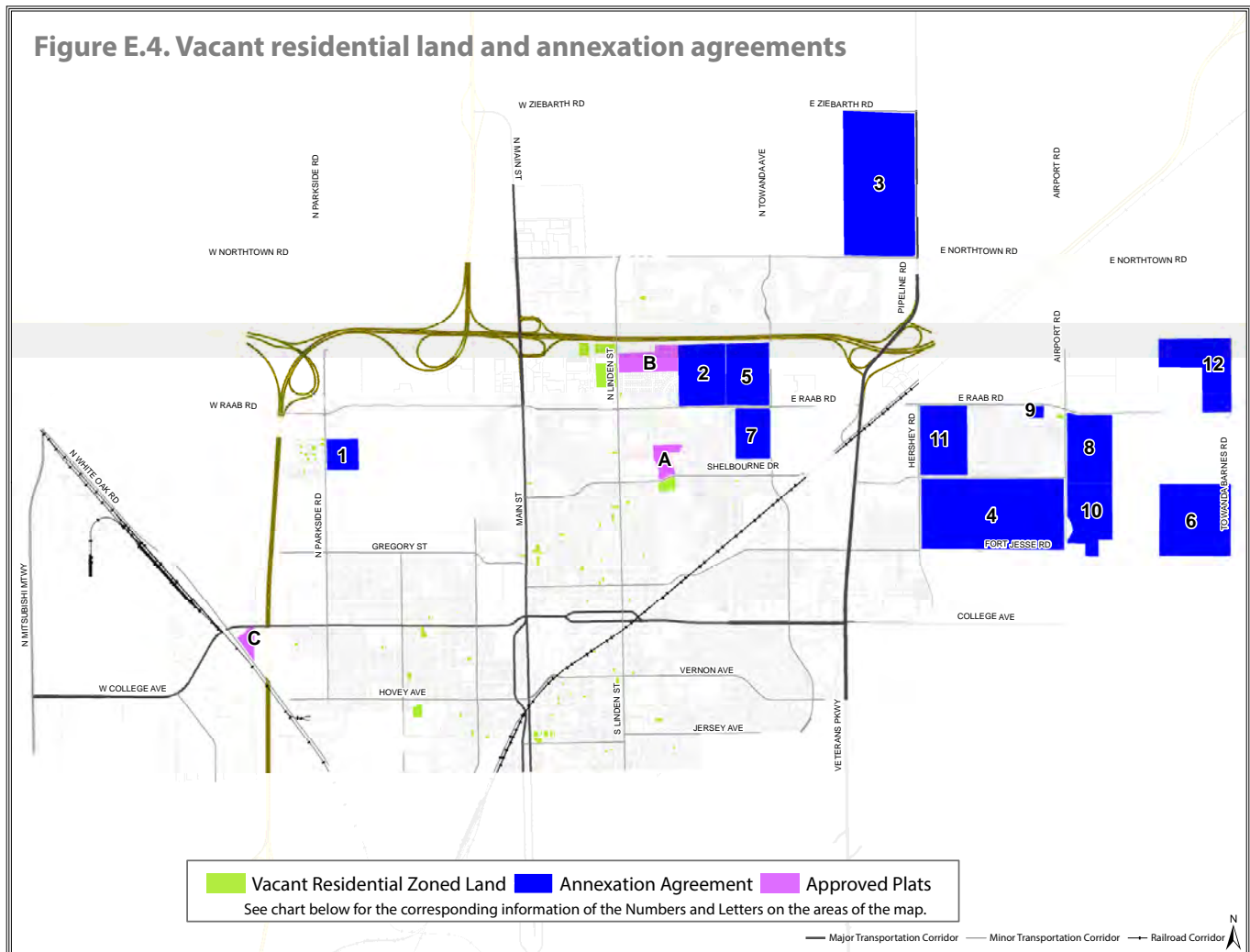
development strains municipal resources. In the last two decades, the Town has made a concerted effort to increase residential densities in pursuit of more compact and sustainable development.

- Not surprisingly for a college town with a high percentage of institutional land uses, over a quarter of the Town's developed land is tax-exempt. While institutional uses play an important role in the quality of life in the community, they must be balanced with revenue-generating uses and located strategically so as not to strain public resources.
- The physical growth of the Town happens through annexation agreements. The Town currently has 12 active agreements, along with approved plats and vacant residential lots, as shown in Figure E.4, that allow for the development of over 3,500 residential units. Further, the Uptown 2.0 plan recommends nearly 1,000

urban residential units. These roughly 4,500 potential units can accommodate upwards of 14,000 people, a major percentage of the projected population change in the next 20 to 25 years.

**1.4 Economic Vitality:** While the Town and the BN metro area have always enjoyed a stable economy, recent changes such as the closure of Mitsubishi Motors, the expansion of State Farm in other markets, and lackluster construction permit activity pose challenges to the local economy. To address these challenges, the community banded together to create a regional economic development strategy called BN Advantage. The Town of Normal, City of Bloomington, and McLean County adopted this strategy in 2015 and are actively working toward its implementation.

- BN Advantage recommends the following five sectors as suitable targets for the region:



Entrepreneurship, Information and Communication Technologies, Agribusiness, Transportation and Logistics, and Advanced Business Services (see Figure E.5). It particularly emphasizes the importance of entrepreneurship in diversifying the local economy. Entrepreneurship is not a sector, but rather an overarching community culture that is critical to grow and sustain businesses in all sectors.

- The land use and infrastructure needs for industries within these target sectors vary greatly. Some businesses, especially startups and smaller businesses, are infill-capable and thrive in mixed-use urban environments that are walkable, bikable, and accessible by public transportation. Others require large acreages, adjacency to complementary uses, and connections to major transportation networks like highways and railroads. Regardless of the type and scale of business, all businesses need access to up-to-date technology infrastructure.
- The Town's revenue sources are fairly diverse. Sales taxes are by far the largest revenue source, bringing in a little over 21% of the Town's revenue. The property tax accounted for about 11% of the Town's revenue. Normal's property tax rate is the lowest among the

seven largest downstate cities in Illinois.

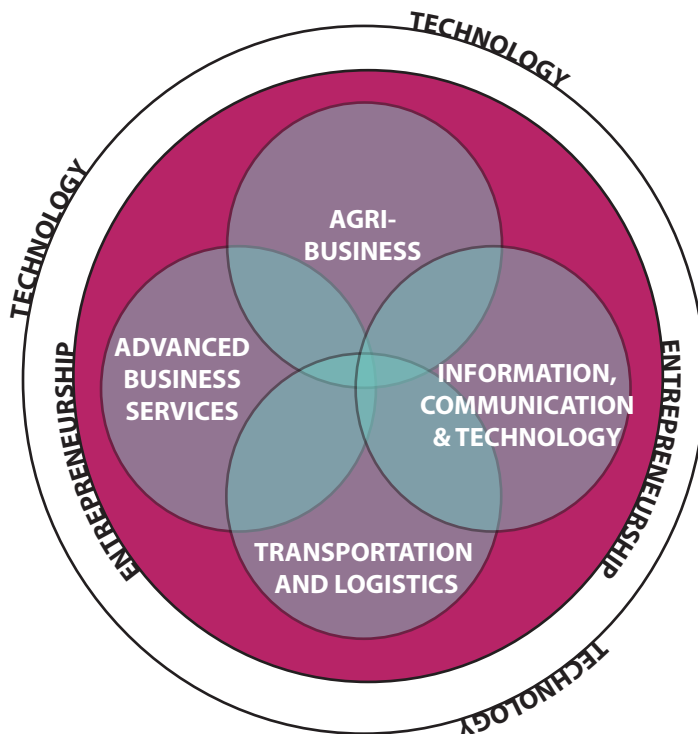
- There are nearly 1,000 acres of vacant land zoned for commercial, office, and industrial purposes within the Town's corporate limits. The vacant land and the Town's many underutilized properties, including the recently vacated Mitsubishi Motors site and vacant properties under institutional ownership, represent opportunities for commercial, office and industrial development (see Figure E.6).

**1.5 Infrastructure and Public Safety:** Nationally, infrastructure issues are a huge topic of concern and public policy debate. While our transportation network is the most visible aspect, water mains, sewer lines, electric lines and gas lines are part of a complex web of critical public infrastructure. The universal challenge facing American infrastructure is that it is aging and needs significant investment for repair or reconstruction. Federal infrastructure policies have a significant impact on local infrastructure issues. For example, the federal motor fuel tax rate determines the level of funding set aside to support local transportation infrastructure.

Generally speaking, Normal's infrastructure is in good repair. However, the Town continues to grapple with the same funding issues other communities are facing. The Town's increasing focus on compact, mixed-use development patterns and efforts to curb sprawl also assist in the efficient management of utilities, both by the Town and by other utility providers.

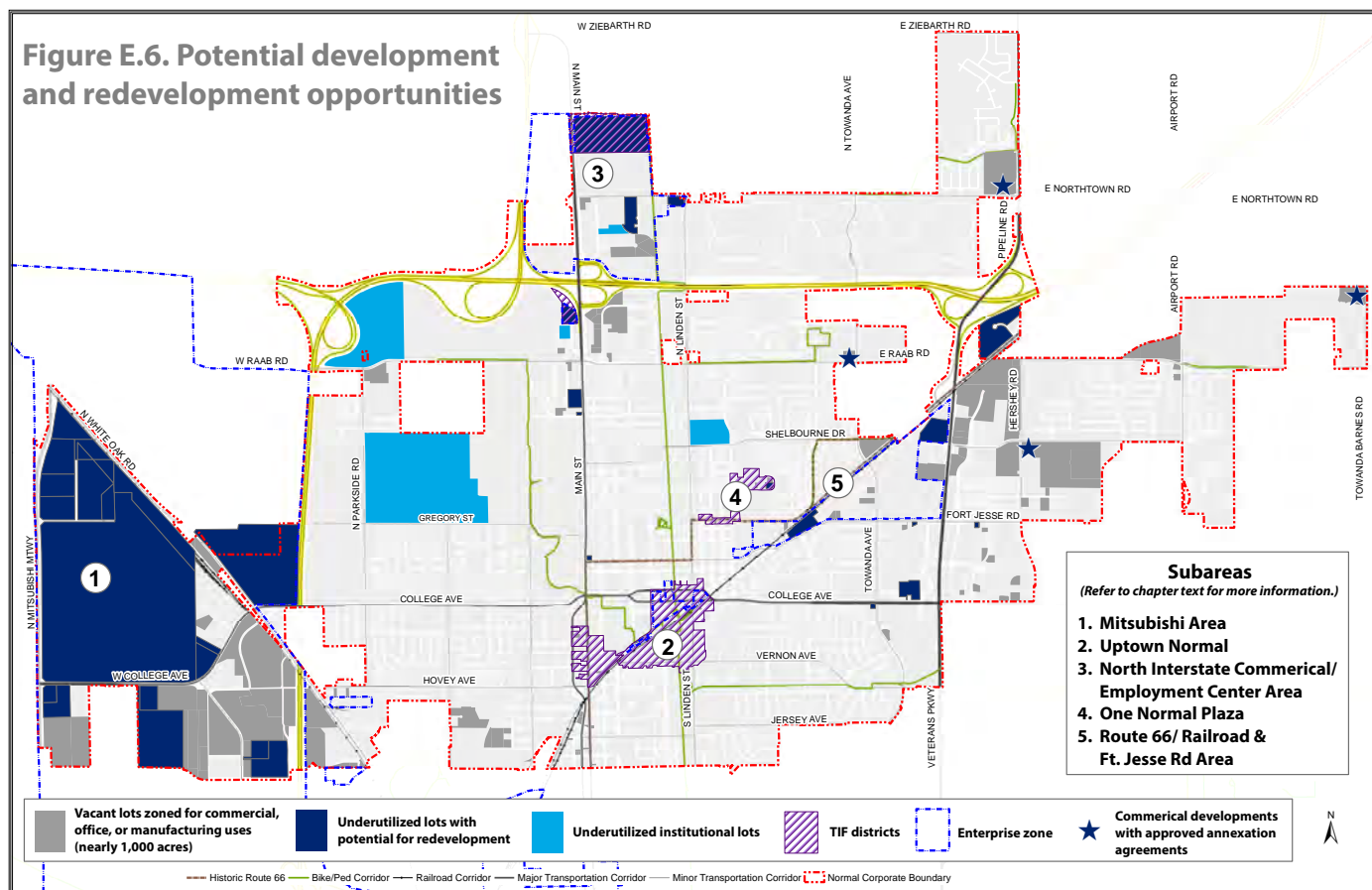
- Normal's more than 400 miles of streets provide connections at all levels of use. Upgrades to the transportation system are being made thoughtfully, keeping in mind the future role of the street network. These include accommodations for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit vehicles.
- In 2016, Connect Transit will implement a revised route structure, intended to prioritize frequency of service on more heavily used routes. This revision will make transit service more flexible for the majority of riders but will also remove routes with less ridership, including some routes in northeast Normal.
- Each infrastructure system, public or private, must be properly installed and maintained,

**Figure E.5. BN Advantage target sectors and their interdependencies**





**Figure E.6. Potential development and redevelopment opportunities**



often in a location shared with other systems. There is limited space within right-of-way easements or on utility poles within which multiple service providers must compete for installation space. Newer technology infrastructure, such as the fiber optic network, exacerbates the problem.

- The Bloomington-Normal Water Reclamation District (BNWRD) advised during the stakeholder outreach process that under EPA standards, the west treatment plant on Oakland Avenue will require reconstruction, possibly within the next 5 to 15 years. This highly complex project could cost an estimated \$140 to \$160 million and should be thoroughly investigated over the course of the comprehensive plan process to determine its implications for the economy, environment, and cost of living.
- Landfill use is of principal concern given the anticipated closure of the McLean County Landfill #2 in the near future. The Ecology Action Center (EAC), the regional solid waste planning agency for the Town, City, and County, is currently updating the county-wide Integrated

Solid Waste Management Plan to address this and other solid waste issues such as recycling and household hazardous waste.

### 1.6 Community Health and Sustainability:

Where people live, work, and play, how they travel, and what they eat all affect individual health and overall community well-being. To that effect, the concept of community health must be understood as the intersection of individual lifestyles, socioeconomic factors, and environmental conditions (see Figure E.7).

- Obesity is one of the major health concerns in McLean County. This is driven primarily by physical inactivity and unhealthy eating habits. Despite continuous efforts to improve walkability and bikability, portions of the BN metro area remains difficult to traverse without a car. Significant portions of the community are also designated as food deserts by the USDA, meaning access to fresh food without a car is difficult.
- Access to mental health services has become an increasingly serious issue in recent years,

gaining public attention as the county jail has been overwhelmed by a growing number of inmates with untreated mental illnesses. The county's Mental Health Action Plan and the resulting increase in funding and services are positive recent steps toward addressing this crisis. However, there is more work to be done in this area. Housing and transportation issues identified in the Mental Health Action Plan must be carefully considered and addressed in the comprehensive plan.

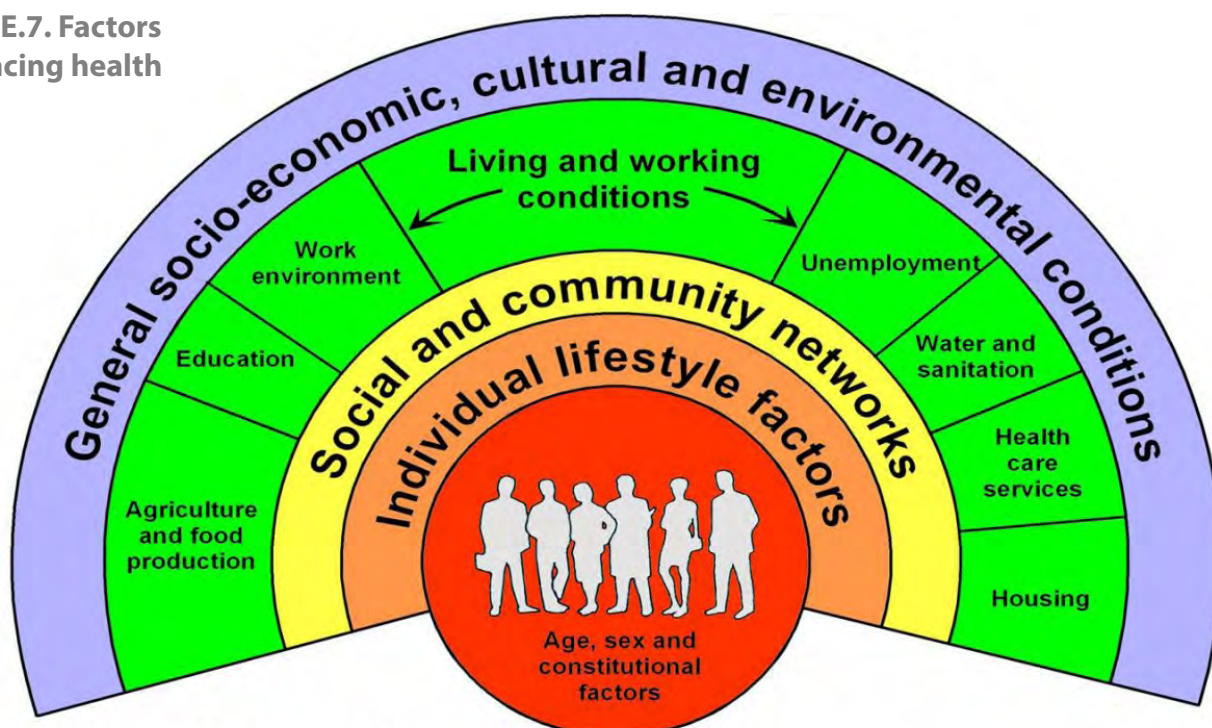
- Normal is a well-educated and affluent community overall. However, some populations, including people with low incomes, seniors, and people with disabilities, need affordable housing options and access to amenities and facilities via alternative modes of transportation.
- The Town of Normal is a leader in sustainability. Its commitment is exemplified by Uptown Normal's environmentally friendly features and the adopted plans for Uptown 2.0 to achieve a net positive environmental impact. The Town is also an active partner in addressing regional environmental challenges. Immediate challenges include air quality, water quality and solid waste. Preservation of McLean County's richest natural resource, its farmland, is an

ongoing challenge as well.

**2.1 Community Survey Analysis:** A huge outreach effort got the Comprehensive Plan process off to a strong start. Over 1,700 people who live, work, and play in Normal responded to the PlanIt Normal survey (see Figure E.8). Thousands more encountered the planning process through a variety of media and community meetings and events. Respondents shared what they like and want to see improved; the factors most important to them when choosing a neighborhood; and their priorities for the Town's future.

- Broadly speaking, respondents characterized Normal as a safe, quiet, family-friendly town with good schools and friendly neighborhoods—much like a small town in that respect—with city-like amenities in the form of excellent higher education institutions and a long list of cultural, shopping, and entertainment options. Uptown Normal, the Constitution Trail, other walking and biking infrastructure, and parks and recreation facilities were particular magnets for positive comments. The Town's leaders were frequently commended for their future-oriented thinking and effective implementation of ambitious plans.
- Certain neighborhood qualities are almost

**Figure E.7. Factors influencing health**



Source: Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991

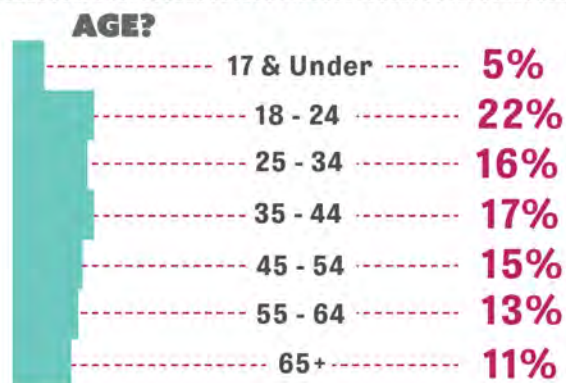
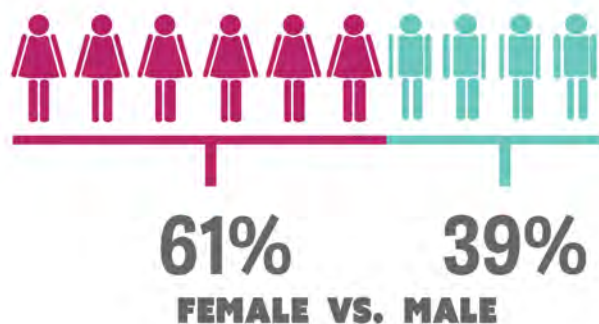
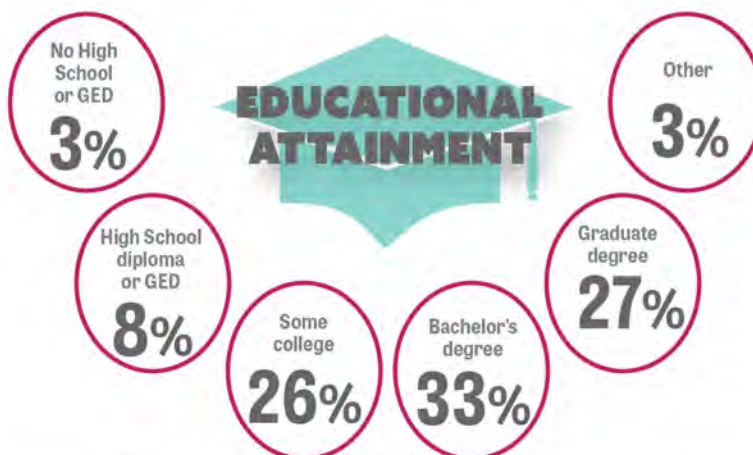


Figure E.8. Community Survey  
Respondents Profile

## RESPONDENTS PROFILE



### WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO NORMAL OR THE AREA?



universally desirable: safety and cleanliness, affordable housing, walkability, attractive public spaces, parks, schools, and proximity to work. Other factors were particularly important to certain demographic groups. For example, aging in place was rated highly by people aged 45 and up, while public transportation was rated most highly by lower income respondents.

- The survey revealed relatively few pressing concerns. Most were calls to build on the Town's existing amenities: infrastructure maintenance, more Uptown redevelopment, more bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, increased access to public transit, and curbside recycling for apartments, among others. There was some disagreement between student and non-student respondents regarding housing and law enforcement issues.

**2.1 Stakeholder Interviews:** Over 40 stakeholders representing apartment managers, the development community, social service agencies, utilities, and Town staff, were interviewed during this process. These one-on-one and small group meetings allowed for honest and detailed discussions about the critical work they do for the community and what they see as their greatest needs and challenges. All interviewees were generally complimentary of the Town and its way of conducting business.

- A lack of public awareness of issues facing vulnerable populations and a dwindling supply of reliable funding were two of the systemic issues raised by the social service agencies. More specifically, the agencies raised a number of concerns regarding the built environment:
  - a dearth of affordable housing
  - supportive housing for people with disabilities and mental illnesses
  - housing solutions for homeless individuals
  - increased access to and frequency of public transit
  - a connected network of trails and sidewalks
  - recreational spaces for people with special needs
  - a framework to support seniors and people with disabilities (e.g., universal accessibility, closing transit gaps and municipal policies that support aging in place)
- Representatives of local builders, realtors, and

engineering consultants discussed various issues impacting development activity within the community. There was a general agreement that regulations and other costs of doing business should be lowered where possible. All interviewees believed that large homes are a thing of the past, and that the future is in smaller homes and denser neighborhoods, which also reduce development costs. Key development challenges include the slower economy and landowners holding large quantities of vacant land within the core of the community, forcing development to "leapfrog" to the outskirts.

- There was a general agreement, among interviewees that discussed infrastructure issues, that the accelerating cost of maintenance and expansion is and will remain a key challenge. One way to mitigate rising costs is to avoid sprawling development and to encourage infill. Other challenges include increasingly congested easements and street patterns not conducive to emergency or transit vehicles. All agreed that interagency and intergovernmental cooperation will be critical to navigating many of these challenges.
- A group of high school students was asked to describe their ideal community. Echoing the preferences of their demographic group nationwide, most of them named characteristics of urban areas: walkability and bikeability; the ability to attract businesses and support start-ups; diversity; and the presence of art in public places. They also want to have access to higher education opportunities and to be close to larger cities.

## KEY QUESTIONS

The above findings prompt numerous questions, a few of which are presented here as a starting point for further discussion and investigation. These questions focus on the physical growth and development of the community and the quality of its environment through the lens of how they serve people today and in the future. Using this “people first” approach challenges the traditional scope and thinking of a comprehensive plan. This tasks us to re-imagine traditional plan elements, such as housing, transportation and parks, to more truly reflect how people experience the Town’s physical and social spaces.

**Growth and development:** How can the Town continue to maintain its balance of a small town feel and big-city amenities as it grows?

- What action should the Town take when annexation agreements expire and extensions are requested? What happens if these annexation agreements are not carried out as originally intended? Should the Town continue to approve additional annexation agreements? How can the Town foster infill development in Uptown while simultaneously approving conventional subdivisions?
- What implications will the community’s expanding physical footprint and declining population density have on the fiscal, social, and environmental aspects of the community? How can the region grow in a manner that preserves prime farmland while not inhibiting population growth?
- Is it possible to apply the smart growth principles that have guided the Uptown and Main Street redevelopments to the rest of the community?
- What can we learn from earlier efforts to apply smart growth principles to residential neighborhoods? How can the existing low-density residential neighborhoods adapt to better reflect those principles? How can the Town work with other partners, such as the school district, to strategically locate community facilities to achieve walkable and bikable neighborhoods?
- How should the Town continue to balance infrastructure maintenance and upgrades

with the ongoing expansion of infrastructure?

- How can land under public ownership, such as streets or detention basins, be utilized more efficiently? As demand for new types of services (e.g., broadband) increases, how can public easements be best managed?
- When investing huge public dollars in infrastructure and facilities, how can we ensure that they support broader community goals?
- **Adapting to a new economy:** What should economic development incentives look like in this knowledge-based, 21st century economy? Can economic incentives also be used to further broader community goals such as smart growth? How can they be used to foster retail development without creating undue competition with the neighboring communities?
  - The land, building, and infrastructure needs of businesses within the BN Advantage targeted sectors vary greatly. Normal is positioned well to accommodate most of them, but which industries best embrace the Town’s core values? How can the Town position itself to attract those most suitable to locate here?
  - What types of housing, transportation choices, public spaces, cultural offerings, and amenities do we need to attract and retain a qualified workforce?
  - How can the Town continue to balance the sometimes conflicting needs and preferences of students and non-students? What role should the university play? How can we do a better job of retaining our college graduates, most of whom currently leave the community?
- **Planning for people:** How can land use, transportation, and other local government policies be inclusive and address the needs of all current and potential residents?
  - How do we accommodate the changing housing, land use, transportation, and employment preferences of Millennials, Boomers, and other demographic groups?
  - As the Town plans the development of



- future neighborhoods, how inclusive can they be in terms of age, income, and physical abilities? How can new neighborhoods provide housing choices in terms of size, accessibility, pricing and ownership vs. rental.
- How can health be understood and addressed more comprehensively (instead of the current piecemeal approach)? What role should the municipalities play in addressing major local health concerns? Can health become part of all policies? If so, how can we measure the effectiveness of such policies on the health outcomes?
  - Do our community's demographic characteristics create barriers for certain groups (such as lower-income residents or racial and ethnic minorities)?
  - **Regionalism:** How can local governments continue to work with other partners toward a common vision that advances the immediate and long-term interests of the agencies and organizations involved and of the broader community? Who should lead the charge?
  - How can the Town and the university work together to proactively plan for the areas most directly influenced by the university? Can ISU's Master Plan and the Town's Comprehensive Plan be better integrated regarding land use issues?

## THANK YOU

Producing this document was possible only through the efforts of many individuals and groups: passionate input from members of the public; assistance in reaching out to residents from a number of community partners; the knowledge and expertise of stakeholders; and the guidance of Town of Normal staff in putting it all together. We thank everyone who played a part. For a more detailed list of individuals whose contributions were invaluable to this effort, please see our Credits page.

Sincerely  
MCRPC Staff

