

## **Chapter 8:**

# **A Sense of Pride in Place**

### **Introduction**

Decatur and Macon County are identified by a range of significant visual landscapes, from Lake Decatur and the historic urban neighborhoods to small towns, farmsteads, and natural areas. Citizens throughout the County are invested in preserving this unique sense of place, with particular attention to historic preservation, open space and environmental conservation, and the celebration of cultural diversity.

Community pride is an attitude as well as a visual statement. The City and County are committed to foster an attitude of value within the local communities and neighborhoods. This can be furthered through the civic commitment and partnerships with local businesses and institutions to provide funding opportunities for projects that project a positive image and strengthen the social institutions of the City and County.

This chapter focuses on a number of specific attributes that distinguish community identity and community appearance throughout Macon County, and suggests principles and policies for preserving, enhancing, and celebrating the community's defining characteristics.

#### **An assessment of trends yields the following observations:**

1. The Decatur Park District and the Macon County Conservation District systems are universally considered two of the community's biggest assets. There is a growing conflict, however, between the need for smaller parks to serve a shifting demographic and the difficulty in maintaining them.
2. Downtown Decatur retains its position as the civic center of the county, despite its declining role as a retail center.
3. The arts resources in Macon County exceed those found in cities of similar size but they remain an underrepresented part of the area's image and identity. Among these resources are Millikin University's Kirkland Fine Arts Center, the Decatur Arts Council and its home, the Madden Arts Center. The community leadership potential reflected in these resources is exemplified in the 2006 "International Arts Experience".

### **Principles**

- P1. Focal points of the arts, culture and civic engagement are located throughout the County.
- P2. The County's growing diversity is honored within its neighborhoods.
- P3. Parks, open spaces, and waterways are protected and enhanced as a catalyst to a reinvigorated image and identified as a source of pride to residents.
- P4. Public infrastructure is located and designed to enhance the look and feel of the places it serves.

P5. Historic and architectural resources are managed to the benefit of the entire community.

**Principle P1. Focal points of the arts, culture and civic engagement are located throughout the County.**

The City and County recognize that arts and culture are important elements in our vision of a healthy community. We are committed to working, in partnership, to promote opportunities for participation in art and cultural activities throughout our community. We will seek to develop "marquee features" that create a distinct sense of place, including such features as gateways, community squares and performance places, and other active areas.

**Policies and Strategies**

- A. Encourage the distribution of civic facilities such as libraries throughout the County with priority given to those locations that strengthen existing commercial centers.
- B. Provide access to arts and cultural programming, in both citywide and neighborhood settings, through various means such as public art displays, themed streetscape programs, classes, special events, and cultural activities.
- C. Work with public and private partners to identify areas that may be underserved and formulate projects to make these programs affordable to all citizens.

**Principle P2. The County's growing diversity is honored within its neighborhoods, institutions and government.**

Decatur and Macon County is home to a number of distinctive cultural groups and neighborhoods. In order to celebrate the diversity of the region, efforts will be taken to increase public awareness of diversity through cultural festivals and activities, and the support of ethnic shops, restaurants, and products.

**Policies and Strategies**

- A. Organize neighborhood and citywide events that promote a sense of pride and ownership of the residents. These could range from organized block parties, commercial area art festivals and sidewalk sales, neighborhood picnics, to citywide programs located in major centers such as downtown, Hickory Point Mall, the lakefront parks, and Conservation District properties.
- B. Encourage architectural design of community facilities that incorporate the unique characteristics of the surrounding area in order to portray or reflect the traits of the neighborhood.
- C. Assure that new parks and recreational facilities meet the needs of diverse populations in the County by providing information and programming to accommodate special groups such as disabled persons, young people, senior citizens, and Spanish-speaking residents.

**Principle P3. Parks, open spaces and waterways are protected and enhanced as a catalyst to a reinvigorated image, providing a source of pride to residents.**

Public spaces are the building blocks of a thriving city. Successful public spaces support many multiple uses, are attractive, and accessible. The City and County recognize the benefits of creating good public spaces. They support the local economy, attract business, promote tourism and cultural activity, decrease crime, promote public health (through walking), and give identity to our city.



There are over 2,000 acres of parks and recreational facilities within the City of Decatur. This includes thirty nine parks and playgrounds, as well as ten miles of trails. The Macon County Conservation District manages another 3,200 acres of land for both passive and active recreation.

**Policies and Strategies**

- A. Encourage a variety of public spaces, from small plazas to large parks, to foster a variety of social gatherings and cultural events.
  - Local plazas within neighborhood and community shopping districts or made part of neighborhood institutions such as libraries, schools, and churches, can foster interaction within the neighborhoods.
  - Design outdoor public spaces such as plazas and civic centers to encourage social interaction and foster a distinct sense of place. Include amenities that provide comfort and relaxation in all seasons.
- B. Plan parks, greenways, and open spaces consistent with the Decatur Metro Area Greenway Plan to assure linkage of municipal and county trails and connections between communities.
- C. Provide for a consistent and coordinated system of park and open space land dedication between units of government and assure pedestrian, bicycle, and automobile/bus access to those areas where appropriate.

#### **P4. Public infrastructure is located and designed to enhance the look and feel of the places it serves.**

The use of context-sensitive design solutions in transportation projects can help to better integrate roadway improvement projects into the community resulting in positive impacts beyond its traffic or transportation function. It accomplishes this through an interdisciplinary citizen-based approach that equally addresses safety, mobility, and preservation of scenic, aesthetic, historic, and environmental resources.

##### **Policies and Strategies**

- A. Establish design guidelines and regulatory controls for private properties in order to achieve a consistent and desired pattern of development including lighting, signage, building setback, landscaping, and access controls. Utilize this concept as a design and as design review tool to address public infrastructure and street front design within the county's corridors and centers.
- B. Establish streetscape guidelines and beautification programs to maintain a distinct character and ensure that new development respects existing historic and natural elements.
- C. Recognize and reward quality public and private design through County, citywide, and neighborhood design award programs.
- D. Establish a component of the County and City web pages that emphasizes pride of community and community design images to make this emphasis known.
- E. Establish community signage programs that stress quality, coordinated design and imagery related to community entry, area identification, and landmark signs. Review and revise current logos, taglines, and the location of such signs.



**West Main Street in Decatur**

#### **Principle 5: Historic and architectural resources are managed to the benefit of the entire community.**

Preservation has a positive impact on civic pride. Historic designations create an awareness of the role that the area and its inhabitants played in the development of the City and County. Designations instill a sense of ownership among residents that results in a desire to ensure that the entire neighborhood is well maintained.

The Decatur Historical and Architectural Sites Commission was created in 1976. The Commission advises and makes recommendations to the City Council on properties and areas for designation as landmarks and historic districts; it grants certificates of appropriateness of construction and demolition within the

local historic districts; and it reviews the maintenance of sites of historical and architectural significance throughout Macon County.

In recent years in Macon County, the approach of historic preservation has changed tides and may better be described as heritage planning. This is the careful management of a community's historic resources while avoiding wasting resources by careful planning and use by thriftily reusing available resources. Preservation is becoming and should maintain the idea of using or managing historic resources with thrift or prudence and avoiding their waste or needless expenditure.



Because technological advances are always changing the function of places, the form must also change. The preservation tactics of Macon County must aim to ease the tension between the form of a place and the ever changing function that citizens place upon it. It should *manage* the changing form with innovative design concepts while holding on to the original purpose of the place. This is important because in most cases a neighborhood still functions as a neighborhood and the residents of the neighborhood want to hold fast to past while improving their living conditions. Such tactics of preservation will only help to keep the housing stock updated and desirable for a variety of homeowners and tenants.

Additionally, preservation strengthens the economy. Visits to historic sites, highlighted by the significant connection between Decatur and the early life of Abraham Lincoln, are a major local component of the tourism industry. Decatur and Macon County's rich history has many stewards. These include the Macon County Museum Complex, Millikin University's Museum and the City of Decatur.

## Policies and Strategies

- A. Maintain an electronic inventory of historically significant structures that can be cross-referenced with building inspections and building permits.
- B. Create an early warning system to provide property owners with assistance in maintaining and improving valuable structures.
- C. Establish an inter-agency working group to coordinate historic preservation education as an economic and community development tool.
- D. Look for opportunities to expand or create more districts throughout Macon County in addition to designating more landmarks.
- E. Provide more grant and funding opportunities to renovate, update, and maintain historic structures.

## **Chapter 9: Implementation**

This section looks at the means for bringing about the Vision described throughout this Plan and for ways to ensure that the community continues to view the Vision and the Plan as remaining current and pertinent to them.

Bringing about the future portrayed in this document begins when the City and County formally adopt the Plan. The Plan then becomes the community's guide for directing its resources and energy toward making this common vision a reality. The ways to achieve this objective are further described below.

Macon County has a variety of governments – the County, the City of Decatur, numerous municipalities, and many special districts such as park districts, school districts, and the conservation district. All of these governmental units have specific duties and responsibilities to their constituents. All are interested in growth and development that provides their constituents with a high quality of life.

This comprehensive planning effort is supported by DUATS. Yet it has a specific focus – transportation. As this comprehensive planning effort reflects the common goals held by the many governments within the County, it would be best if there were some vehicle to assure coordination between them. This would provide a forum for coordinated community leadership to emerge such that understandings might be reached which would encourage all units of local governments to work together for the common end. Strong consideration should be given to establishing such an entity.

Communication, coordination, and skillful management between the County, the City of Decatur and the many incorporated and unincorporated jurisdictions can bring the prosperity of growth while mitigating adverse impacts. The guiding principles are the basis for decision-making within the County. The challenge is turning this vision of the future into reality.

### **Community Involvement & Consensus: Keeping the Tradition Alive**

The City of Decatur and Macon County have long encouraged public participate in local government activities. Keeping people knowledgeable about and involved with the Comprehensive Plan's implementation is crucial to ensuring its ultimate success.

First, it is important to sustain the City and County's tradition of involving the public is having citizens regularly serve on boards and commissions. These groups address a wide variety of civic concerns. Meetings are kept open to all members of the community. Public hearings on key issues – such as Plan amendments, the capital improvements program, subarea studies, and specific development proposals— are held as part of the continuing planning process.

Second, it is important to encourage developers and others with planning proposals to make early contact with neighborhood groups and other interested parties. This will allow for a greater understanding of the issues and time to seek resolution of contentious points.

## Interaction between the Comprehensive Plan and the Citizens

Although the Comprehensive Plan is intended primarily to guide the physical development of our community, individuals and their families ultimately feel the results of such development. The planning process aspires to make this interaction between people and their physical landscape one in which all facets of our community can prosper, not only economically, but also intellectually, aesthetically, and spiritually. The Comprehensive Plan seeks to accommodate and encourage the participation of all citizens of the City and County in making public policies to implement the visions of the community. Comprehensive planning is a continuous process, requiring a continuing, equitable, and frequent interaction between the governments and the communities. The following strategies will help keep this Plan alive.

- Maintain – through the City’s Economic and Urban Development Department – current mailing and contact lists of local neighborhood groups and homeowner associations.
- Contact and inform nearby property owners, interested groups, and other appropriate agencies of all formal development applications.
- Offer free Internet access on an on-going basis at public libraries, senior centers, and publicly owned locations of common assembly.
- Conduct periodic workshops and focus group meetings in various locations throughout the County to solicit ideas for planning and public policy.
- Examine ways of simplifying the development regulations and supporting documentation to encourage a broader understanding of planning concepts and their relevance to neighborhoods’ and businesses’ continuity and viability.

## Land Use Regulation

The City and County have a number of administrative and regulatory tools for implementing comprehensive plans. Some of the land use administration approaches to be used in plan implementation include:

- *Zoning* - Zoning is the legal means cities and counties decide how land can be used, the intensity of those land uses, and the relationships between various land uses. Illinois State law – as with most all states – requires zoning to be developed in accordance with the community’s adopted comprehensive plan. This is one of the primary reasons cities and counties have comprehensive plans. Zoning, as a legal document, exists as both a map showing the geographic boundaries of each district and a written ordinance detailing the uses and conditions of each district.
- *Subdivision* – A subdivision is the process of dividing land into lots and/or streets. While a variety of standards apply to where, when, and how the subdivision of land can happen, having an approved subdivision plat is a basic step in the development process.
- *Design Standards* – Special site design or other conditions not otherwise covered in the zoning and subdivision ordinances are contained in a series of “design standards.” These standards spell out

unique characteristics that may apply to a type of development proposal. These include, for example, design considerations for older, more intensely developed neighborhoods, for childcare centers, for trails, and for the downtown.

## **Public Investment**

The capital improvement programming process plays a vital role in guiding when and where the city – and even to some degree rural areas – grow. Public infrastructure – including transportation facilities, water, sewer, parks, schools, and libraries – is essential to the health, safety, and welfare of the community. As the community grows, it is desirable that these systems and facilities be developed concurrently – that is, at the same time – with that growth.

If growth occurs without the development of adequate public infrastructure, or the public infrastructure lags behind the growth of the community, the quality of life in the whole community will be diminished. Facilities may become overcrowded or overused. In the worst case, essential public services might not be available, thereby threatening the health, safety, and welfare of the community.

Conversely, infrastructure should not be built or developed if it is not needed. Public resources are scarce and should be conserved and used efficiently. Development of infrastructure beyond the needs of the community would not be beneficial to the community as a whole. The key to a successful community is the concurrent development of the infrastructure with the development of the community – a balance between the need for infrastructure and the need to conserve resources.

Capital improvements programming can be separated into two broad areas:

**Public Sector Contributions.** Investment in capital facilities – generally defined as any improvement with a useful life in excess of 15 years – has a powerful influence on the development of a community. Roads, water, trails, wastewater, parks, streetlights, fire stations, libraries, government administration buildings, schools, electrical facilities, and sanitary landfills are all basic pieces of what makes up a city. Hundreds of millions of dollars of public tax dollars and user fees are invested each year in these facilities. The public process used to determine where and when such investment occurs is basic in determining how the Comprehensive Plan’s Vision is achieved.

The City and County each use an annual capital improvements process. Both jurisdictions designate those capital improvements they plan to build over the next several fiscal years. The document that does this is called the “Capital Improvements Program” or CIP for short. A companion document to the CIP – called the “Transportation Improvement Program” or TIP – is prepared on an annual basis. Development of the TIP is a responsibility of the Decatur Urbanized Area Transportation Study. The TIP gathers together in a single document those local, State, and Federal transportation capital projects proposed for the next four years. These include improvements for streets and highways, airports, railroad support facilities, trails, and public transit.

**Private Sector Contributions.** Private capital is a significant part of the funding used to construct infrastructure in new developments. Most local streets, sidewalks, sanitary sewer, and storm sewer mains are built and paid for by the private developer. Decisions made in the private sector play an important role in managing and guiding the expansion of the urban area. Expenditures from private sources are critical to furthering the growth of the community.

## **Annexation Policy**

Annexation policy is a potentially powerful means for achieving many of the goals embodied in the Plan's Vision. The provision of municipal services should coincide with the jurisdictional boundaries of the city or village. The extension of water should be predicated upon annexation of the area by the city or village. Annexation should occur before any property is provided with water, sanitary sewer, or other potential city services. Land that is remote or otherwise removed from the limits should not be annexed; land that is contiguous to a city and generally urban in character may be annexed; and land that is surrounded by the city should be annexed.

Annexation generally implies the opportunity to access all city services. Voluntary annexation agreements may limit or otherwise outline the phasing, timing, or installation of utility services (e.g., water, sanitary sewer), and may include specific or general plans for the private financing of improvements to the infrastructure supporting or contributing to the land uses in the annexed area.

The character of existing residential areas should be respected as much as possible during the annexation process. When low-density "acreage" areas are proposed for annexation due to the City's policy, additional steps should be taken to ease the transition as much as possible, such as public meetings, advance notice, and written explanation of changes as a result of annexation. In general, many aspects of a property may remain unchanged, such as zoning or covenants. However, any annexation of existing residential areas will include some costs that must be the responsibility of property owners.

Annexation to facilitate the installation of improvements and/or possible assessment districts is appropriate if it is consistent with the annexation policies of the Plan listed above. Plans for the provision of services within the areas considered for annexation shall be carefully coordinated with the Capital Improvements Program of the City and the County. Each town in Macon County will have their own procedures for annexation.