

Eau Claire Comprehensive Plan 2015

Neighborhoods and Districts Plan



City of Eau Claire Wisconsin

Neighborhoods and Districts Plan

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Neighborhoods and Districts Plan

This chapter of the *Eau Claire Comprehensive Plan* describes the City's approach to improving neighborhoods and districts. It combines ideas from other chapters as they apply to the central areas of the city while offering new initiatives.

Summary of Neighborhoods and Districts Issues

The major issues related to neighborhoods or districts in Eau Claire are:

- 1. What are the appropriate roles of the City and the private sector in helping to improve the older neighborhoods?** Should the task of rehabilitation and reinvestment be left to property owners while the City maintains the infrastructure and provides normal City services? To what extent should (or can) the City enlist the assistance of private businesses, foundations and not-for-profit corporations?

The City has been investing in streets, parks and downtown redevelopment, but should there be funds allocated to specifically leverage private reinvestment? Should the City devote an extra measure of effort or a higher level of service to the older neighborhoods compared to the newer areas? These may include plowing alleys, additional street lighting, additional police surveillance, funding a neighborhood development corporation, and others.

- 2. What can be done to encourage owner-occupancy of houses, either existing or new?** The rate of home ownership has been falling in the central neighborhoods, and that sometimes leads to dis-investment and other problems.
- 3. Which, if any, locations would be acceptable for new multiple-family housing?** Sometimes, an increase in housing density is necessary to make redevelopment economically feasible.
- 4. What should be done to preserve neighborhood character during change?** This may include density, housing type, land use patterns, historic preservation and architectural style.
- 5. What should the City do to encourage the re-use of major obsolescent buildings in the neighborhoods?** This may include buildings such as old churches that are no longer used for religious purposes.

6. **Should a neighborhood non-profit development corporation be created to assist in neighborhood revitalization?** This could be a private company with financial assistance and representation from the City and major corporations or foundations. It could have abilities that the City government does not.
7. **What should be done, if anything, to coordinate the efforts of the neighborhood associations?** Presently, they are not coordinated. United efforts could be more powerful and efficient.
8. **Should there be additional cooperation and communication among the University and the neighborhoods?** The University has a major influence on its nearby neighborhoods.
9. **Should City Code enforcement be more proactive and less complaint-driven?** Because of reduced staffing, inspectors focus their attention on those properties where citizens have directed their attention.
10. **Should special on-street resident parking provisions be considered in neighborhoods?** Some Cities issue stickers or permits for vehicles owned by neighborhood residents that allow parking in high demand locations, such as near colleges, enabling police to enforce resident-only parking rules.



Classic American architectural patterns are evident in the neighborhoods of Eau Claire

The Importance of Neighborhood Revitalization

Neighborhood revitalization is being given special attention in this update to the Eau Claire *Comprehensive Plan*. Although prior versions of this plan have covered the entire city across all of its subjects, and the City has worked with residents to prepare many neighborhood and district plans, this will be the first time that a coordinated strategy has been offered to address the challenges of the six neighborhoods around the central business district.

The reasons for this emphasis and new chapter are several.

- First, there is a sense that, generally speaking, the **conditions** in the oldest parts of the city are slowly becoming worse not better, structural deterioration is continuing with age, the rate of home ownership is declining, nuisance complaints are escalating, and household incomes, on average, are stagnant, among other indicators. There are exceptions to each of these generalities, of course.
- It is felt that the individual **neighborhood plans** are essential but not sufficient because they lack the strength possible through a more coordinated approach.
- Many **millions of dollars** of private and public money has been invested in these neighborhoods during the past 150 years, and those commitments may be greatly diminished unless corrective action is taken.
- Larger private or public **costs** could be avoided in the future if steps are taken now.
- The **lives** of people – the purpose of cities – are diminished by concentrations of inadequate housing, education, health care or employment.
- The reduced vitality of central locations would leave only perimeter sites for growth, which would have negative **environmental** effects through increased driving and loss of farmland or natural habitat.
- To have a strong **downtown**, the surrounding neighborhoods should be healthy.
- The central neighborhoods have tremendous untapped potential for private re-investment, growth and vitality. They can each tap the **assets** of location, history, charm, water, views, parks, transit, major institutions, jobs, the arts and a sense of community.
- The City now believes that it has the problem of **fringe growth** management under control as a result of the 2005 plan and subsequent agreements, allowing it to turn its attention more clearly back to the center.
- Finally, the fiscal, social and environmental wisdom of neighborhood revitalization equates to **sustainable** urban conditions.

Goal and Objectives

Goal

Achieve significant, continuous and lasting improvement to the physical, social and economic conditions of the neighborhoods around downtown.

Objective 1 – Municipal or County Services and Facilities

Support neighborhood revitalization by improving city facilities and services in those locations most in need.

Objective 2 – Change and Protection

Enable changes in land use and buildings while protecting the desirable characteristics of the neighborhoods.

Objective 3 – Physical Improvements to Housing and Businesses

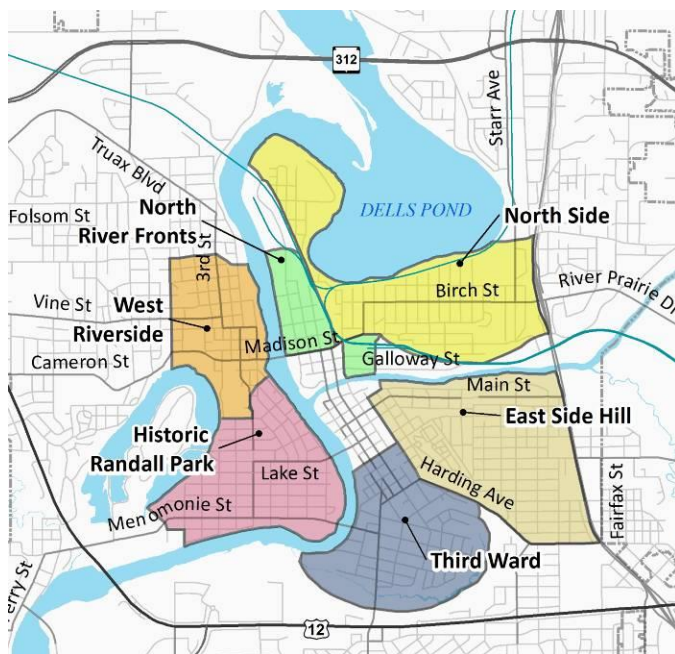
Improve the housing stock, the rate of home ownership and the business districts of the central neighborhoods through the coordinated private and public actions.

Objective 4 – Social and Economic Improvement

Focus the existing resources of other agencies in health, education and employment to improve the social and economic conditions of the neighborhoods.

Objective 5 – Resident Leadership and Organization

Empower residents and build their capacity for neighborhood leadership.



This chapter addresses primarily the neighborhoods shown on this map but may also pertain to other portions of the city that have similar needs such as the Shawtown neighborhood located in the southwest portion of the City.

Objective 1 – Municipal or County Services and Facilities

Support neighborhood revitalization by improving city facilities and services in those locations most in need.

The City and County already provide a wide range of facilities and services to all parts of the City, but it is felt that there are gaps and shortages that ought to be addressed to help the older neighborhoods rebound. Presently, the City provides:

Street maintenance and periodic reconstruction. The City has a regular schedule of street maintenance and rebuilding but the condition of the oldest streets is considered sub-par by some. Snow plowing is adequate but always an easy target of grumbling. A major shortcoming, however, is that the City does not patch, rebuild or plow the alleys, which are public.

Sanitary sewer and water lines. Sewer and water lines are adequate, repairs are made as needed and long-term improvements have been programmed.

Police and fire protection. Police and fire services are considered adequate to good. A city-wide community policing program instituted since 1995 has improved response times and lowered crime rates.

Parks, greenways and multi-use paths. The waterfront linear parks are exceptionally strong in the central neighborhoods although the number and extent of play fields could be better.

Street trees. Trees between the sidewalk and the street are planted and maintained by the City. However, the pattern is incomplete as new trees have not been consistently required with land development and dead trees are not always replaced.

Code enforcement by the City. Under Section 16.04 of the City Code, the City inspects new buildings under construction for conformance to the Wisconsin Building Code. However, the City does not inspect existing structures for Building Code violations. Rental housing is not subject to any additional Code requirements or an inspection schedule. Housing is not required to be fully in conformance with the Building Code before it is sold.

City Code Section 8.28 includes minimum standards for the maintenance of yards and lawns, but these are enforced mostly when a complaint has been received.

Code Enforcement by the County. The City-County Health Department administers the Housing Maintenance and Occupancy Code throughout Eau Claire. The department conducts inspections, re-inspections and investigations in response to complaints or referrals.

The Housing Code (Section 16.08) is not the same as the Building Code (Section 16.04 of the City Code). The Housing Code sets minimum standards necessary for health and safety in any housing.

The Department also administers the Intensified Housing Code Compliance Program in the Community Development Block Grant target area. The Department identifies houses with Housing Code violations through a systematic inspection and works with owners to bring the properties into compliance. Many significant interior health and safety hazards have been identified and exterior maintenance improved. A map of the generalized results of the exterior survey is shown in the Housing Assessment chapter of this plan.

Public and rent-assisted housing. The City’s Housing Authority administers funds from the federal, state or city governments to provide a small number of public housing units for the very low income, elderly or handicapped, rent-assistance and home-buying assistance.

Urban redevelopment. The City’s partially-independent Redevelopment Authority buys and sells properties to promote private redevelopment of blighted locations.

City planning. The City prepares and updates the *Comprehensive Plan*, sub-area or neighborhood plans, and topical plans such as parks, historic resources or utilities. Based on those, the City administers the zoning and subdivision ordinances, which regulate land use and development standards, the historic preservation program, and all capital improvements (parks, utilities, etc.).

Public Health. The City-County Health Department provides services engaged in education, assessment, and service aimed at preventing or reducing public health problems. Topic areas include immunizations, lead paint, food, water, infants, child development, air quality, animals, garbage, lodging, alcohol, exercise, communicable diseases and others.

Justice administration. The County courts system.

Environmental stewardship. The City prepares plans and enforces regulations for the protection of shorelands, wetlands, floodplains and a general “sustainability” campaign.

Policies

1. City Service Improvements

Consider improving these services across the City:

Alley maintenance. Schedule the repair, reconstruction and snow plowing of public alleys to the same level as public streets.

Street maintenance. Upgrade the standards for the repair of potholes and cracks in local (minor) streets.

On-street parking. Review parking regulations in congested areas and determine if changes would reduce parking congestion. The City could also consider instituting a program in which residents of neighborhoods affected by a high number of cars parked by non-residents may receive a sticker or permit that allows them to park on their street. Cars without such sticker would be ticketed during certain hours.

Code enforcement. Become more proactive in the enforcement of external and nuisance violations of the City maintenance regulations including items such as broken windows, unmowed lawns, parking of cars, trucks, boats, trailers and recreational vehicles, trash handling, barking dogs, and so on.

Rental Housing Registration and Inspection. Consider starting a program requiring that all rental housing be registered with the City or County and that such housing is inspected by the City-County Health Department on a periodic basis for conformance to the Housing Code life safety regulations. For the sake of efficiency, focus the inspections on properties most likely to need improvement; others may be inspected less frequently. Selection criteria may include age of the building, location, prior complaints or similar factors.

Policing. Continue to provide a strong police presence in the neighborhoods and along Water Street to eliminate problem parties, vandalism and problem behavior from excessive drinking.

Taverns and Bars. Continue to limit the number of taverns and bars along Water Street and in other areas in the vicinity of residential neighborhoods.

Objective 2 – Change and Stability

Enable changes in land use and buildings while protecting the desirable characteristics of the neighborhoods.

Every vital city changes over time, but better cities do not lose their essence in the process.

The neighborhoods and downtown of Eau Claire have changed and will continue to evolve. They are much different than they were 100 years ago, and they will be different a century from now. The great majority of these changes have been positive -- just look at the riverfronts, the old Phoenix Steel site or Water Street. Through this process, the community has retained the best of its architecture, its parks, its civic core and the look and feel of its residential areas. Downtown has declined as a retail center, as have so many others, but the foundation has survived and its returning transformed. The place still says “Eau Claire”.

The neighborhoods must continue to change to survive and thrive. Some of the buildings must be replaced and some of the development pattern will be remolded. But this evolution can and should conform to timeless principles of city design and beloved features of local heritage. The legacy of the past can inform improvements for the future.

The City can guide appropriate change through its planning and regulations. Its tools include the *Comprehensive Plan* chapters of Land Use, Urban Design, Transportation and Neighborhoods; the individual neighborhood plans; the *Waterways Plan*; the zoning ordinance; the historic preservation program; and parks or other public improvements. But it is ultimately the owners and residents who pay the bills and make the decisions. They must be willing to effect change, embrace it and shape it wisely.

Policies

1. Plan for a Different and Better Future

Prepare for changes in the housing stock, land use and businesses by adopting and following plans that are endorsed by the community.

Continually update the *Comprehensive Plan* and the sub-area plans. Use those plans to make decisions about public spending or regulations, or private investments.

Accept the idea that change does not necessarily mean loss, and that a community different from the present can be just as good if not better.

Anticipate that some houses and other buildings will be removed, but insist that their replacements contribute to a better future for the neighborhood.

2. Use Appropriate Guidelines

Study the design principles relating to infill development offered in the Urban Design chapter of this plan and follow them to the extent possible.

3. Study Potential Locations of Change

Work with the neighborhood organizations to identify specific locations that are most suited for or in need of redevelopment, including perhaps increases in density, to guide private initiatives. Consider amending the zoning map or text in response.

4. Historic Preservation

As outlined in the Historic Preservation chapter, continue to study and identify areas that should be preserved because of their architectural or historic character. Consider including these locations in historic districts with design guidelines.

5. Schools

Work with the Eau Claire School District to keep elementary schools in the neighborhoods surrounding downtown.



Infill and replacement housing should complement the neighborhood character even if height or density increase. Key elements are the front setback and doors and windows that face the street.

Objective 3 – Physical Improvements to Housing and Businesses

Improve the housing stock, the rate of home ownership and the business districts of the central neighborhoods through coordinated private and public actions.

Improving the housing stock and the business districts in the neighborhoods around downtown will require a multi-pronged, long-term effort by many organizations and individuals working in coordination. Above all, the profit motive of the private sector will have to be harnessed because the available resources of the public are inadequate for the task.

Residential and business district revitalization are one part of a campaign of community development, the others being jobs and job-readiness, health, and education and training. However, cities such as Eau Claire have a long history of influencing building rehabilitation, district redevelopment, land use and, of course, supportive streets, utilities and parks. Thus, urban physical evolution is the component most suited for the City.

The experience of other cities shows that a campaign of physical renewal will probably be most successful if all the components are addressed. Other entities have expertise in the massive challenges of jobs, health and education, so the City would be wise to enlist them in devising and executing a focused program of neighborhood revitalization. Indeed, efforts have been underway for quite some time in all four of those areas, but coordination has never been formalized.

The organizations needed for the overall task of neighborhood revitalization, sometimes called community development, are:

- Private businesses such as banks, land developers, builders, investor-owners and small business owners
- Individuals, the owners or tenants of residential or business structures
- Government, principally the City, but also state or federal agencies
- Not-for-profit community development organizations such as Western Dairyland
- Institutions such as the university, the technical college and the hospitals
- Charitable foundations, both local and regional.

Central neighborhood housing conditions probably warrant intervention at three levels, including:

1. Market-based responses to the demand for the better housing.
2. Government intervention to serve the lowest strata of the market, which the private sector does not adequately address.
3. A combination of private and public efforts to work between the first two.

Local housing entrepreneurs will sometimes invest in the central neighborhoods when the opportunity appears more promising than the alternatives. However, factors that mitigate against new residential development in these neighborhoods include existing buildings, lack of clear sites, weak demand, competing sites, prevailing rental or sale prices, neighborhood conditions and perceptions, and the resulting mismatch of costs and revenues.

Government help in rent, mortgages, rehabilitation or new construction is inadequate to the need. Federal, state and local funding has diminished since its high-water mark decades ago.

Some cities have witnessed the creation of not-for-profit community-benefit corporations that work on a variety of housing or other community development needs and often receive government or private assistance. There are many varieties of these organizations, as they are always tailored to local circumstances. Three local examples are Habitat for Humanity, the four-county Western Dairyland Community Action Agency, and Downtown Eau Claire, Inc., which have differing but overlapping missions and service territories. Another example is Neighborhood Housing Services, Inc., an organization with affiliates across the nation that works in housing rehabilitation, purchasing and budgeting in neighborhoods that are declining but within the realm of successful private intervention.

Money for public-benefit corporations may come from charges for their services, surplus revenue from their ventures, grants from local or state governments, foundations or individuals, loans or grants from private banks or other corporations, or loans from a community development finance institution (CDFI).

A CDFI may be a community development bank, credit union, loan fund or venture capital fund; a micro-enterprise development loan fund; or a community development corporation. All of those organizations are defined and enabled by the US Department of the Treasury under a 1994 law¹ and funded by the CDFI Fund, which provides money through a variety of programs, or the New Markets Tax Credit Program, which was created to induce equity investments in low-income communities. As an example, Forward Community Investments is a CDFI based in Madison that has funded Western Dairyland, presumably with loans.

Policies

1. Neighborhood Revitalization Intensified Planning Process

Upon adoption of this comprehensive plan, convene several meetings of residents, leaders, decision makers and specialists to plan a strategy for central neighborhood revitalization. Use an independent facilitator with knowledge of the topic to lead the meeting(s). These principles and ideas are suggested as a starting point.

Mission

Plan a way to achieve measurable results that benefit the physical, social and economic fabric of the central neighborhoods with emphasis on housing improvement. In particular, study whether a non-profit neighborhood development corporation should be formed and what its initial charge should be.

Principles

- A profitable private sector can be a powerful tool in neighborhood revitalization
- The work of the private sector should align with community hopes
- The government should do work and serve people that the private sector cannot or will not and should protect the most vulnerable in society
- Public infrastructure, services and spending should leverage private investment
- Public participation will improve the plan and its application.

¹ The Riegle Community Development and Regulatory Improvement Act of 1994.

Participating Representatives

Representatives of the following groups or organizations should be invited to participate in the intensified planning process for neighborhood revitalization. An interim steering committee appointed by the City Council should be formed to set up the meeting(s).

- Neighborhood leaders
- City and County elected or appointed officials
- City management
- Banking, including a Community Development Finance Institution
- Business
- Builders and land developers
- Major local institutions such as hospitals, the University and the School District
- Foundations
- Local community development organizations
- Leaders of neighborhood revitalization corporations from other cities
- Prominent local individuals who are committed to the mission.

Role of the Private Sector

The private housing construction industry will be expected to meet market demands for new housing.

But beyond that, it is hoped that builders and developers will lend their expertise to the proposed community development corporation, include affordable housing in their larger buildings, maintain their buildings to an acceptably high standard and go beyond the minimum necessary in all of their endeavors.

Likewise, it is hoped that the lending industry will help with loans at less than market rate for affordable housing, and, like the builders, participate on the board of directors for the proposed public-private development corporation.

In addition to expertise and good works, it is hoped that private organizations from all industries will also underwrite the community development corporation with donations of money.

Role of the City and County

The public sector is meant to include the City, its Housing Authority and its Redevelopment Authority, Eau Claire County, and the City-County Health Department.

The public sector, particularly the City, should contribute with what it does best:

- Convene, organize, plan, inspire and lead
- Maintain streets, utilities, parks and trails
- Provide police and fire safety services
- Proactively administer the City Code
- Provide public financing, such as scattered-site tax increment financing
- Help ensure that the lowest-income members of the community have decent, safe and affordable housing, either through new construction or rent subsidies

- Tackle the least feasible housing redevelopment projects; clear and re-sell or redevelop the most troublesome buildings; do what the private sector and the proposed community development corporation will not
- Provide housing rehabilitation loans and grants for lower income homeowners to correct Building Code defects
- Prepare and maintain a comprehensive plan, neighborhood plans, zoning regulations, a Building Code and historic preservation incentives
- Receive money from the federal and state governments.

Role of the Not-for-Profit Sector

- Devise a role for itself that bridges the gap between that of the private housing development industry and that of the City
- Engage in selective housing development, redevelopment, rehabilitation and related housing services
- Form a tax-exempt, non-profit corporation led by directors from banking, business, government, institutions, the construction industry, residents, other community-benefit corporations and foundations
- Receive funding from the City, local commercial banks, community development finance institutions, foundations, government and private individuals
- Manage itself and negotiate in business without all of the regulatory restrictions and transparency requirements of government.

Related Services to Be Considered

The range of services for the City and the proposed community development or housing development corporation will be defined during the planning summit and subsequent deliberations. It may be decided that some of these activities are best administered by the City, another public-benefit corporation or an institution such as a college. The range of activities is wide and could include any of these or more:

- Building new housing, including units considered “affordable” or “accessible,” on sites that it buys and prepares or sites obtained from other parties
- Housing rehabilitation loans and counseling
- Counseling for home ownership, mortgage applications, personal finance and foreclosure prevention
- Home ownership down-payment assistance
- Housing maintenance advice and assistance
- Historic preservation
- Building housing designed for students
- Acting as a resource for job training.

Objective 4 – Social and Economic Improvement

Focus the existing resources of other agencies in health, education and employment to improve the social and economic conditions of the neighborhoods.

If physical development were the only challenge facing the central neighborhoods, it would be relatively easy to address. However, other troublesome conditions exist in the topics of household income, employment, job-readiness, training, health, education, language skills and others. Achieving sustainable and significant neighborhood improvement often requires progress on several fronts.

These myriad problems are highly intractable, unfortunately. It may be more than enough for the City or a new community development corporation to emphasize physical improvements at the outset of this long campaign without itself taking on extra responsibilities. Moreover, there are already agencies and organizations focused on these fundamental tasks, including schools, colleges, non-profits and health care organizations as well as City departments.

Policies

1. A Comprehensive Approach

In the next and subsequent stages of planning for central neighborhood improvement, seek to devise a comprehensive approach to neighborhood improvement. Focus and coordinate efforts that may already be underway by local organizations other than the City. Involve representatives of allied public or private organizations in planning and implementing this campaign. Set specific objectives then measure and report results.

2. Arts, Culture and Entertainment

Seek ways to use the arts, culture and entertainment to supplement efforts in housing, employment and social services as a complete campaign of community development.

Eau Claire and many other cities have found this to be an effective strategy.



Neighborhood development involves more than housing improvement. Resilient families are the foundation and purpose.

Objective 5 – Resident Leadership and Organization

Empower residents and build their capacity for neighborhood leadership.

It long ago became a tenet of community development that the best and most effective initiatives are those that are conceived with the help of, or led by, those people most affected. Likewise, it's true that campaigns or plans that reflect community values are endorsed politically and stand the test of time.

As residents serve meaningful roles in grass-roots democracy, they tend to grow in their ability to effect change. A neighborhood or community seeded with veterans of the process is well equipped to find a consensus, articulate its preferences and work with the outcomes.

Policies

1. Neighborhood Planning

Continue to prepare and update neighborhood or district plans with involvement from residents, property owners and tenants. Implement the recommendations of each neighborhood plan through City actions, private initiatives or the proposed community development corporation.

Five neighborhoods have formal plans, all of which have been assisted by the City and adopted into the *Comprehensive Plan*. The neighborhood and district plans completed as of 2014 were described in the Assessment of Conditions.

2. Neighborhood Organizations

Help to form and sustain neighborhood organizations. Work to initiate an organization in any neighborhood that does not have one, such as West Riverside.

There are five neighborhoods with organized associations, although the degree activity varies among them.

Periodically host meetings of all the neighborhood associations so that they can compare efforts and ideas, resolve any differences near shared boundaries, and provide unified requests to the City.

3. Communication with the University

Facilitate annual meetings between representatives of the University and the neighborhood associations to exchange ideas about topics of mutual interest and communicate them to the City.

4. Role in a Community Development Corporation

If a non-profit community development corporation is formed, include a representative sample of neighborhood residents on its board of directors.

Plan Action Steps

The City will take the following steps to implement the recommendations of the Neighborhoods and Districts Plan.

**Table 9-1
Neighborhoods and Districts Plan Actions**

Action	Timing
Planning Summit. Initiate and organize the planning meeting of representatives from the public and private sectors to advance this proposal for intensified and ongoing neighborhood improvement, including creation of a not-for-profit neighborhood development corporation.	2015
Coordinated Community Development. Seek to devise a comprehensive approach to neighborhood improvement. Focus and coordinate efforts that may already be underway by local organizations other than the City. Involve representatives of allied public or private organizations in planning and implementing this campaign.	2016 – 2025
Code Enforcement. Become more proactive in the enforcement of external and nuisance violations of the City maintenance regulations.	Ongoing
Rental Housing Inspections. Consider beginning a program requiring that rental housing be registered with the City or County and that such housing is inspected periodically for conformance to the Housing Code.	2016
Alley Maintenance. Schedule the repair, reconstruction and snow plowing of public alleys to the same level as public streets.	Continuous
Street Maintenance. Upgrade the standards for the repair of potholes and cracks in local (minor) streets.	Continuous
Parking Regulations. Review parking regulations in congested areas and determine if changes would reduce parking congestion.	2016
Parking Sticker Program. Consider instituting a program in which residents of neighborhoods affected by a high number of cars parked by non-residents may receive a sticker or permit that allows them to park on their street.	2016
Neighborhood Plans. Continue to prepare and update neighborhood or district plans with involvement from residents, property owners and tenants.	Continuous
Land Use Planning. Work with the neighborhood organizations to identify specific locations that are most suited for or in need of redevelopment, including perhaps increases in density, to guide private initiatives. Consider amending the zoning map or text in response.	Continuous

Action	Timing
<p>Organizational Coordination. Periodically host meetings of all the neighborhood associations so that they can compare efforts and ideas, resolve any differences near shared boundaries, and provide unified requests to the City.</p>	Continuous
<p>University Communication. Facilitate annual meetings between representatives of the University and the neighborhood associations to exchange ideas about topics of mutual interest and communicate them to the City.</p>	Continuous