

Community Outreach  
Summary

October 2022



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## The Role of a Comprehensive Plan

The City's Comprehensive Plan is our community's vision for where we want to be in the next 20 years. As the City's long-range planning guide, the Plan directs all future actions of the City.

Included in the Plan are the strategies to achieve the goals and objectives by which community-wide land use, economic development, transportation, social, environmental, and quality of life decisions are made. The City's current Comprehensive Plan is from 2005, and it is time to bring it up to date.

*Imagine Urbana*, the City's Comprehensive Plan update process, began in late 2020. It is centered on community outreach to identify goals and aspirations for the future development of the City.

Our entire community should have a say in how the City moves forward. This wide-ranging conversation explores where we have been, where we are now, and where we would like to be in 20 years. It is up to all of us to ensure the Plan is environmentally and economically resilient, as well as, equitable across the community.

This Community Outreach Summary is a snapshot of the initial community engagement conducted for the next Comprehensive Plan. It covers what outreach methods were used and how those methods evolved to broaden the voices heard. Most importantly, it provides an overview of the input received that will guide our future Comprehensive Plan.

## How We Engaged the Community

### Setting the Stage

In 2020, staff outlined a road map timeline for the Comprehensive Plan process and presented it to City Council. *Imagine Urbana* was chosen as the name for the engagement portion of the plan, and a local designer, Jamie Hedrick, created the logo and graphics. Planning also got underway for the *Imagine Urbana* website, our initial community engagement and education tool.

Urbana residents are very mobile, and governance differs greatly from state to state, county to county, and city to city. To help the Urbana community understand the various governing bodies and agencies that serve our businesses and residents, thirteen videos were recorded and posted to the *Imagine Urbana* website. Each featured the agency director talking about their organization's structure, services provided to the community, and their funding sources. The City of Urbana, Urbana Park District, Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District (MTD), Champaign County, Parkland College, and others, were able to explain which agencies are responsible for the many services provided to our community.

In addition, we made "About Imagine Urbana" and "How Does the Comprehensive Plan Impact Me?" videos featuring people who work, live, visit, shop, and study in Urbana, each describing why the Comprehensive Plan is important to them.

Over Fall and Winter 2020, with COVID vaccines widely available in Champaign County, we hosted

numerous meetings with City of Urbana partners to plan Summer 2021 outdoor events. Groups like the Urbana Park District, Urbana Free Library, Cunningham Township, and Champaign County Regional Planning Commission supported and encouraged these efforts.

We also developed an SMS text survey and made it available in four languages (English, French, Chinese, and Spanish), which was accessible from any cellphone - no smartphone, internet connection, or computer was needed to take the text survey. It took several months to find a vendor willing to develop the software needed for the survey, to test it in each language, and then launch it. A Denver start-up, Cloud303, agreed to create the prototype software for this innovative outreach method.

The Comprehensive Plan public engagement website, *ImagineUrbana.com*, launched in February 2021. BangTheTable, a company specializing in online civic engagement, provided the website framework and COVID-safe engagement tools for people to share their ideas about the future of Urbana. Tools included: an Idea Wall to post thoughts and recommendations, an interactive map to pin favorite Urbana places and areas needing improvement, and a survey. Within the first two weeks, there were over 100 posts to the website!

### Community Outreach Phase Gets Underway

After *ImagineUrbana.com* launched, we varied our community engagement methods to help us hear from more people.

Early in 2021, and a year into the pandemic, most engagement activities took place on Zoom, such as two interactive workshops with Dream Girls Academy teens, and presentations to community groups like CCNet, Champaign County Bikes, and Head Start's Early Childhood Education program. Numerous social media, television, and radio presentations publicized

*ImagineUrbana.com*, upcoming events, and the need for community input.

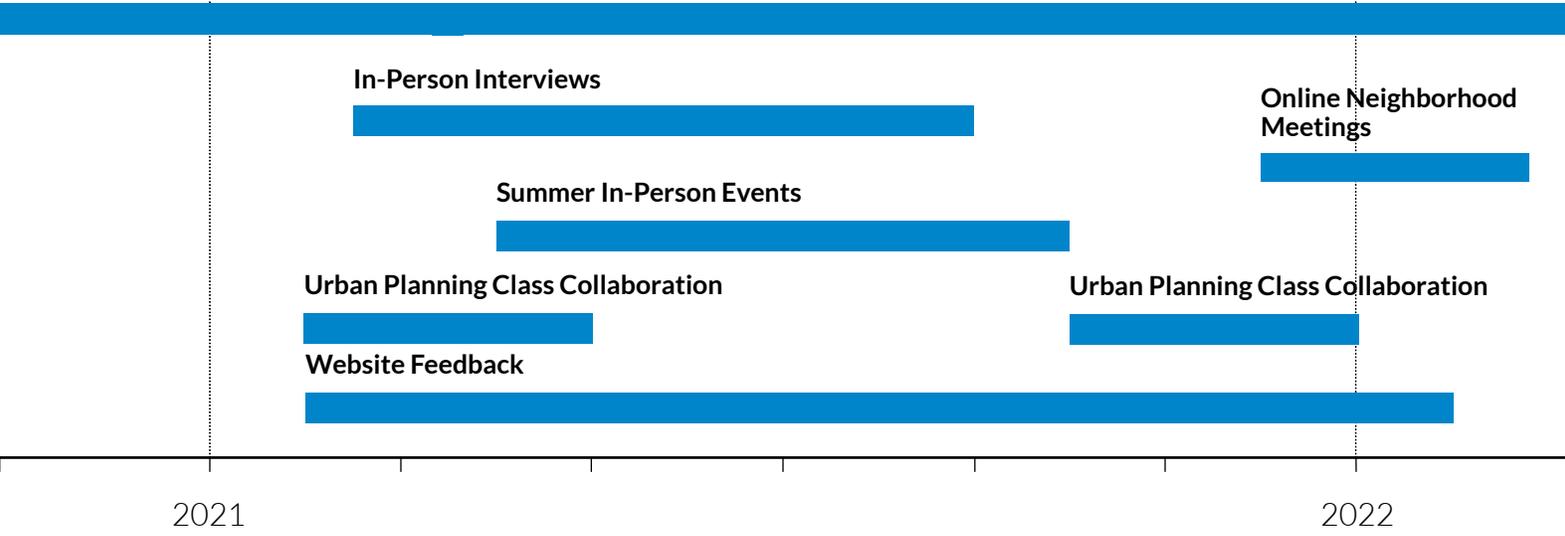


As the weather warmed and Champaign County COVID vaccination rates increased, outdoor and socially-distanced summer programming got underway, we started our in-person engagement with vaccination clinics at Salt & Light, Winter Farmers' Market, Silver Hearts grocery distributions, and Bike to School and Work events. In Summer, we continued with Urbana Free Library events, Urbana Park District activities, Urbana Arts & Culture programs, festivals, resource fairs, senior center visits, a self-guided historic downtown walk, and more!

Seeing that some residents had difficulty or were reluctant to attend meetings or events (due to work schedules, accessibility, or government mistrust), we worked with a University of Illinois Urban and Regional Planning class to seek out unheard voices. The class selected four groups to target in the Spring 2021 semester: second- and third-shift workers, people with disabilities, the historic Black community, and the Latino community. Their outreach efforts included having conversations with area employers, workers, and community organizations.

# PHASE 1 ENGAGEMENT TIMELINE

## Boards, Commissions, and Council Meetings



### Assessing Engagement Results

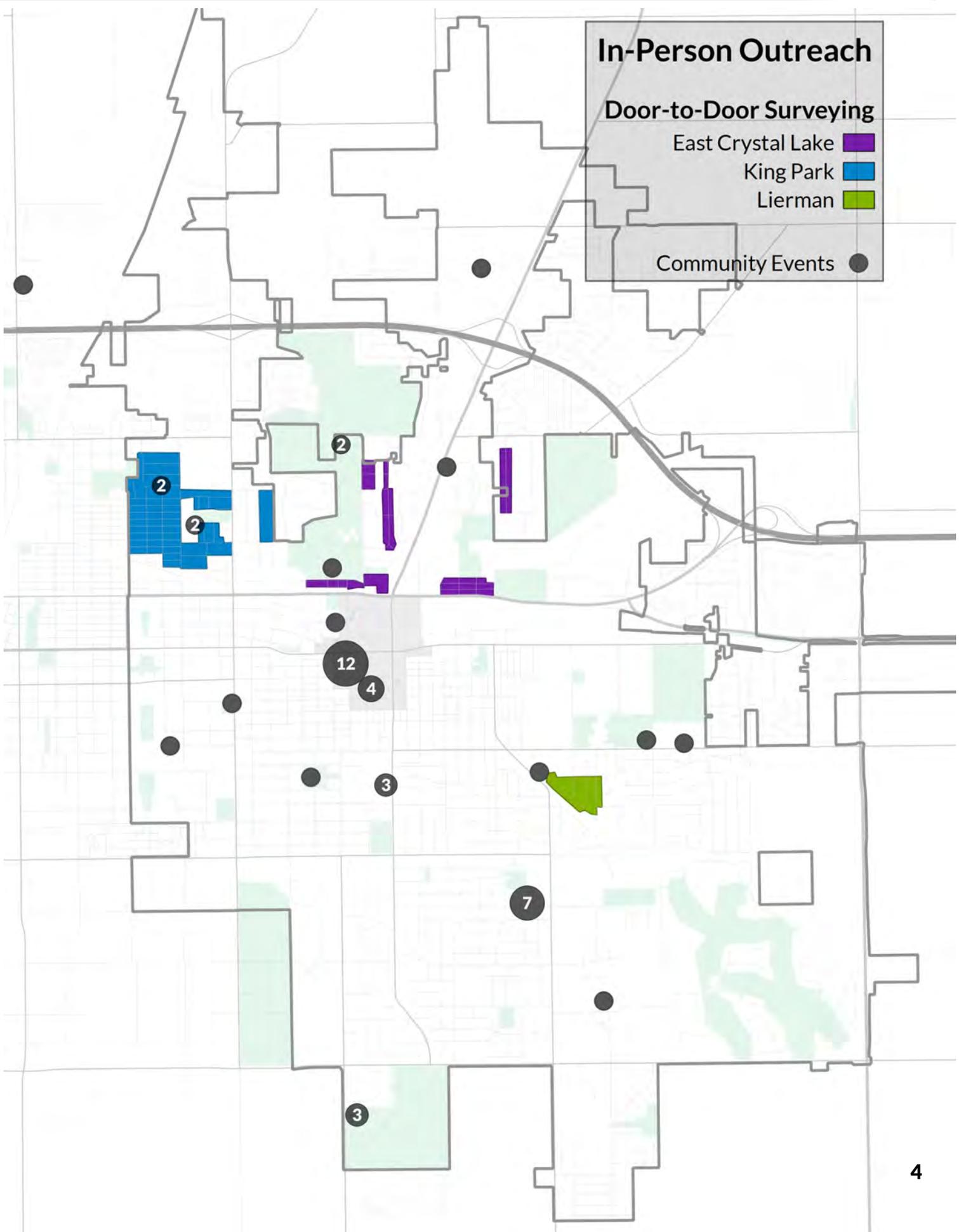
In looking at the *ImagineUrbana.com* responses, there was strong participation from a few well-represented neighborhoods. However, low-income and high-minority neighborhoods were generally not using the website to provide feedback. Participating in events and giving presentations to community partner groups made slow progress in addressing this shortfall.

Re-evaluating the community outreach process resulted in our making the decision to focus on areas of Urbana that were not being heard from. In Fall 2021, the University of Illinois Urban and Regional Planning class developed engagement methods for three areas not involved in Comprehensive Plan engagement. Outreach included door-to-door conversations with residents and targeted event outreach in the King Park, Lierman, and East Crystal Lake Park neighborhoods.

Conversations took place with residents and shoppers at various times of the day and week in key areas. These included Highland Green, Aspen Court, Woodland Park, Silverwood, Gateway Shoppes, El Progreso, Family Dollar, Best of Africa, and King Elementary School.

Other conversations and surveys occurred across the City, with seniors at Brookdale Senior Living, neighborhood groups and home owners' associations, parents' organizations, employees at Urbana companies, students at campus events, and more.

The most effective outreach strategies for hearing from those who do not usually get involved in civic engagement proved to be collaborating with community partners and reaching out to residents where they live.



**28**

**Presentations to  
Community Groups**

**21,000**  
**Households Received  
a Postcard**

**10**

**Engagement Activities  
Outside of Businesses**

**15**

**Board and Commission  
Meetings**

**K-12 Parent and Student  
Meetings and Events**

**11**

**26**

**Community Event  
Participation**

**24**  
**Neighborhood  
Meetings**

**9**

**Media Mentions**

**Hours Spent Going  
Door-to-Door**

**46**

**Students Involved**

**44**

## What We Heard

After knocking on countless doors, talking with dozens of community groups, having numerous one-on-one conversations, collecting hundreds of surveys, and receiving a lot of ideas through our Imagine Urbana website, we had to make sense of the variety of input we heard. Poring over every comment and every survey response, we identified five distinct theme categories that people consistently wanted to see the City's new Comprehensive Plan to address:

Housing and Neighborhoods

City and Community Services

Community Health and Safety

Transportation and Infrastructure

Cultural and Economic Vibrancy

To illustrate how we classified comments, below is a response from our website survey, which includes all five themes. Each segment of the response is color-coded to show how we assigned them to one of the main themes.

"Challenges include **community violence**, lack of a **gathering place and skill development opportunities for youth**, keeping **infrastructure current**, the need to go to **green energy for municipal, business and residential areas**, increase in **affordable housing**, and the need for **stable financial base** which University and hospitals could be partners with the City. We also need a **central gathering location** in the downtown..."

-website survey respondent

The graphic below aggregates responses to the survey question, "What Challenges/Opportunities Exist for Urbana?", as well as **ImagineUrbana.com** Idea Wall responses addressing challenges and opportunities. The five word clouds represent each of the five main themes. Inside each large word cloud are the sub-themes for each main theme. The size of the sub-theme reflects the number of mentions each sub-theme received.



## Diversity of People Leads to a Diversity of Ideas

In every community, there is diversity of opinions among residents. Responses to our community engagement efforts would often conflict with others depending on one's perspective. Current events, as well as personal experiences, often influenced an individual's response.

### Where do people love to take others to show off Urbana?

348 total responses



- 61% Downtown
  - 11% of all responses specifically mentioned Market at the Square.
- 17% Champaign
- 9% University Parks
- 7% Urbana Parks
- 6% Other

*Note: 11% of places were closed at the time or closed later.*

### What do you love about Urbana?

Top 10 responses out of 395 total responses



### Why did you choose to live in Urbana?

359 total responses.

25% of the responses cited the University of Illinois.

Next most cited reasons:

- Compact and Connected City
- Family
- Work

## Diversity of Input by Type of Outreach

There were differences between in-person responses vs. website survey responses, which generally reached different demographics. For example, in-person respondents were more likely to mention food access, public safety/gun violence, and inequities and “white flight” within the school system. In response to “What should Urbana’s priorities be for the next 10 - 20 Years?”, “Education” was mentioned more frequently in in-person surveys vs. website surveys. “Economic Development”, however, had numerous mentions in both in-person and website surveys, emphasizing the need for more jobs and businesses throughout Urbana.

In response to “Why do you choose to live, work, shop, or study in Urbana?”, website survey responses most frequently mentioned a connection to the University of Illinois. In-person responses often mentioned the University, but family ties were a more commonly-cited reason. For the same question, website survey responses were also more likely to mention the ease of getting around Urbana, walkability, and nearby access to work, schools, and stores than in-person survey responses. This could be related to unevenness in development patterns and accessibility issues in some neighborhoods.

## City and Community Services

### Governance

Many comments in this category focused on government communication and facilitating civic engagement. Those survey respondents felt the City could be doing more to get a diverse range of perspectives involved in our local government. Specific suggestions included making meetings more accessible, forming connections with community leaders and organizations, making the City's online information and resources more easily navigable, and being transparent in government operations.

**"Better engagement with a wider group of residents. Reach out to groups or people who have fewer opportunities to attend regular consultations/events."**

### Schools

Numerous comments mentioned the public school system. Perceptions of the school system's quality varied— some respondents viewed our school quality as an asset, while others felt our schools fall short of where they should be.

Several comments referenced segregation in the school system and "white flight." Some parents expressed concern about safety in schools. Outside of school, many thought that additional programming for youth could have positive impacts on the local economy and public safety.

**"Create youth programs targeted at kids age 10-18. This is a vulnerable age and programs (sports, etc.) could really do a lot to help with community violence."**

### Social Services for At-Risk Populations

Other comments included expanding social service programs for vulnerable populations, such as residents facing issues with homelessness, food insecurity, addiction, and mental health.

**"The community can put more funding into maintaining homeless shelters and food pantries in addition to looking for more opportunities to create jobs in the community."**

### Taxes

Many comments also focused on expanding the local tax base, often in combination with reducing property taxes, which many homeowners find burdensome.

**"Develop a more stable tax base"**

## Cultural and Economic Vibrancy

### Urbana's Downtown

Frequent comments concerned Urbana's downtown area, and focused on attracting and maintaining businesses and redeveloping the Lincoln Square Mall and hotel. Several respondents appreciated the businesses inside the Mall.

Some comments noted that more housing near downtown could benefit businesses in downtown.

**"I think downtown Champaign appeals more to people because of its nightlife scene of live music and food, which I think Urbana could potentially mirror in the best way."**

**"[Urbana should] bring more shopping and nightlife to the center of downtown."**

### Arts and Culture

Comments spoke highly of existing events. Respondents voiced an interest in creating more public spaces for events, performances, and community interaction. Having more places to go and more things to do in Urbana versus Champaign was a recurring theme.

**"We need a consistent and free venue to organize and host classes and events - preferably a public venue where nonmembers are always welcome to see for themselves what opportunities exist for THEM - free, \*participatory\* arts and membership in supportive, generous, life changing arts communities."**

### Business Ownership and Employment

The importance of having quality jobs and supporting local business ownership was frequently conveyed. These comments were usually in combination with alleviating poverty and reducing inequality.

**"Develop an understanding of the types of jobs that provide salaries sufficient to support a family, identify and remove the barriers attracting and supporting these kinds of jobs, ... and provid[e] services to help residents get this training and secure the relevant jobs."**

### Convenient Businesses

Existing commercial areas, or the lack of commercial areas in some parts of Urbana, was a concern. For example, respondents expressed a desire for more attractive businesses and development in the Philo Road business district.

Some neighborhood comments addressed needing more convenient neighborhood services, such as a grocery store, bank, and community meeting space.

Some responses would require changing City zoning regulations to allow for mixed-use development that includes diverse types of homes alongside businesses.

**"Create opportunities for new small businesses through development of larger housing complexes near downtown with subsidized storefronts for new small businesses."**

## Housing and Neighborhoods

### Housing Access and Affordability

There is general agreement among survey respondents that housing could be more affordable. Comments mentioned possible solutions, like building more housing of all prices and types, building more affordable housing, and increasing available rental assistance and home-ownership resources. Respondents pointed to homelessness as a concern, desiring supportive housing opportunities and wraparound resources for this population.

**"Lack of affordable housing – rent is too high, wages too low."**

**"Social service agencies need more funds to distribute to families in crisis, specifically in regard to emergency housing."**

### More Types of Housing

There was a range of opinions on where and what kind of housing and other development should be prioritized for new construction. Some students stated that they feel Urbana is lacking housing options compared to Champaign.

### Neighborhood Diversity and Zoning

Respondents were often at odds with some seeking more diversity in their neighborhoods, while others wanting their neighborhoods to remain unchanged. Some comments preferred neighborhoods opened up to a range of housing types, including residents from different backgrounds and income levels, and having close proximity to businesses and other amenities.

These kinds of comments frequently noted that residential-only zoning has produced undesirable transportation and accessibility outcomes. Comments also referenced that existing Urbana residential patterns are quite segregated, and that increasing housing affordability and diversity could help address this.

In contrast, there were numerous comments from residents who are primarily concerned with limiting new development in their neighborhoods. Those comments see new construction, especially larger apartment buildings, as a threat to neighborhood character.

**"I would like to see more mixed-income neighborhoods. It seems like there's been an increasing concentration of poverty and stratification of wealth."**

**"I want Urbana to preserve local neighborhood feel as University high-density housing, and multi-story buildings are being built all around us."**

### Quality Green Space

Urbana's existing green spaces were frequently mentioned in response to questions about their neighborhoods' (and Urbana's) greatest assets. This includes parks, the wide variety of trees, and other lawn landscaping. Some comments from residents in more peripheral areas of the City would like to see more parks and outdoor recreation closer to them.

Looking toward the future, several comments expressed concern for ensuring that new development take environmental impacts and energy-efficiency standards into consideration.

## Transportation and Infrastructure

### Road and Sidewalk Maintenance

Urbana's road conditions frequently fall short of where residents would like them to be.

In addition to maintaining existing assets, responses often mentioned aligning Urbana's infrastructure with the health, accessibility, and sustainability needs of the 21st century.

**"Some of the brick sidewalks between campus and downtown are hard to walk on, and very dangerous with tree roots and icy conditions."**

### Design for People Walking and Biking

While streets and sidewalks for walking and biking were often commented on as a positive asset in Urbana, there was a desire for redesigning streets for all users. Several respondents wanted better road design for people walking and biking. Comments pointed to poorly maintained sidewalks and insufficient street lighting as obstacles to walking in Urbana.

Roads that are primarily designed for cars make people feel unsafe and discourage walking and biking to destinations. A desire for more streets designed to calm traffic was noted.

### Development Impact

Many comments about the quality of walking and biking overlapped with comments about development patterns and zoning. For instance, more compact, mixed-use development would decrease reliance on cars for day-to-day activities and encourage people to walk, bike, and use transit.

**"Too many parts of town are large stretches of residential only areas making it hard for people to get what they need within walking distance."**

### Connecting Infrastructure to the Environment

Improving roads and sidewalks, and supporting frequency in bus service, were often connected to concerns for the environment and reducing transportation's impact on the environment.

Many residents wanted to see the City prioritizing sustainable infrastructure, recommending increased utilization and availability of renewable energy throughout the City. Some residents would also like to see more opportunities for environmentally-friendly waste management in the form of City-sponsored composting programs.

**"[I would] love for the city to be a leader in municipal / local environmental action by supporting its citizens how it can to increase solar panel usage and converting the focus of roads from cars to bikes and pedestrians"**

## Community Health and Safety

### Crime and Gun Violence

Responses provided suggestions as well as concerns. A range of suggestions for potential approaches to addressing local crime included additional opportunities for youth, improving economic opportunity for all residents, better lighting for street safety, and increasing police presence. Others wanted to invest more in social services, in addition to or in place of police.

**"Young people just don't have anything else to do, but turn to gangs/violence."**

### Support for Police vs. Redirecting Resources

There is polarization in Urbana on the subject of policing. At one end, comments were in favor of a "disinvest, reinvest" approach, where police funding would be redirected towards social services and economic opportunity.

At the other end, comments indicated support for police, and felt that increased presence was needed in some areas. Some respondents were somewhere in between and did not necessarily want to disinvest in police, but wanted to focus on increasing oversight, improving community relations, and adding opportunities and resources within neighborhoods facing issues with crime.

**"We need police reform and increases in social services -- like tutoring and post-incarceration reintegration -- as well as greater economic equality through better paying jobs."**

**"Employ more police officers to enforce the law."**

### Health and Safety

Some comments about community health and safety intersected with other categories. For example, many survey respondents were concerned about fast traffic in residential areas where children play, and safety concerns related to poorly maintained sidewalks or unlit streets.

**"There should be better street lights in residential areas, I've had my car broken into twice after dark because there's no way to see people on the street once the sun goes down."**

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## Future Considerations

From our community engagement, we identified the following priorities for future consideration. These will help guide the development of goals and objectives for the Comprehensive Plan.

### Transportation and Infrastructure

- Taking care of existing infrastructure
- Promoting active transportation
- Supporting sustainable energy and infrastructure

### Housing and Neighborhoods

- Increasing affordable housing
- Balancing differing viewpoints on neighborhood development
- Addressing diversity of housing and people
- Property maintenance and beautification

### Cultural and Economic Vibrancy

- An active downtown
- Equitable investment throughout the City
- Equitable access to businesses
- Additional public spaces and events

### Community Health and Safety

- Addressing gun violence
- Expanding services and opportunities, not just policing
- Equity in law enforcement actions
- Increasing street and sidewalk safety

### City and Community Services

- Strengthening community and government relationships
- Youth engagement and opportunities
- Increasing services for vulnerable populations
- Expanding the tax base

## Looking Forward to the Next Comprehensive Plan

The City's new comprehensive plan will encompass the priorities that arose during Imagine Urbana's broad community engagement phase, lessons learned from assessing the 2005 Comprehensive Plan, and the City Council's strategic goals.

The next step toward the new Plan's development is to engage the public in more in-depth discussions of the community engagement priorities. Interactive exercises will show decision-making trade-offs, such as the impact from prioritizing one recommendation over another. The feedback from those discussions will provide guidance for drafting the new Comprehensive Plan's goals and objectives.

For background prior to the discussions, the community will soon be able to explore ***Examine Urbana***. Each chapter looks at the current state of City matters, including Housing, Energy and the Environment, Transportation, Arts and Culture, Neighborhood Health and Safety, and Development and Taxes. Following each chapter, future considerations are proposed for the reader to contemplate.

Valuable insights from the **2005 Comprehensive Plan Assessment** will be applied to the new Comprehensive Plan.

- We will keep the Comprehensive Plan at a community-wide level.
- We will integrate general community concerns across the entire Plan.
- We will annually evaluate progress made and update the plan as needed.
- We will incorporate equity in each strategy and goal.

**Most importantly, the City's New Comprehensive Plan will address Equity and Sustainability in every aspect of the Plan.**

## It's All About U

This Citywide Comprehensive Plan process depends on you! Stay engaged by checking out ***ImagineUrbana.com*** for information on upcoming community discussions, the status of the Plan, and to sign up for the ***Imagine Urbana Newsletter***.

**Email comments and questions to [ImagineUrbana@urbanaininois.us](mailto:ImagineUrbana@urbanaininois.us)**

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