

# The COMPREHENSIVE Plan



**F**or at least half a century, perhaps much longer, people have been planning Albert Lea. It has been a continuum of evaluating progress, exploring solutions and making change since the formation of the City Charter in 1934 and the first formal comprehensive plan in 1948. In 1972, we updated our plan and envisioned a community taking advantage of its location at the crossing of two interstate highways (a system which didn't exist when the first comprehensive plan was framed), with growth occurring at an amazing rate. That plan's premise—community growth as a result of man-made infrastructure at a national scale—set a tone for development that continues to today. Since that time we have continued to plan, establishing a growth boundary jointly with Freeborn County in 1982, periodically amending the Comprehensive Plan and evaluating future growth areas and establishing a Strategic Action Plan through the Albert Lea Listens process in 2004.

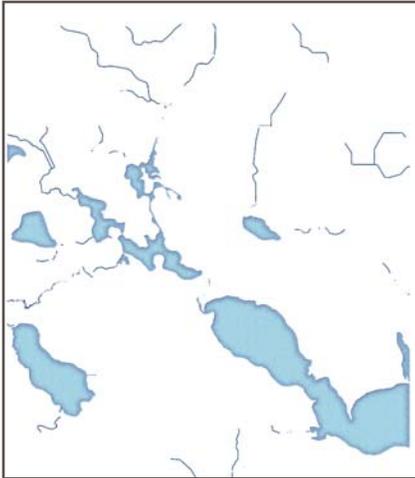
Events dictate that planning is a dynamic part of a community and must recognize how quickly our world can change. Major and minor changes to our community landscape make us consider—or reconsider—the actions we've taken as a community. But our comprehensive plan is about the broader directions first, and actions that support those directions second. So when we see a downturn in the housing market as we did in early 2000, we look for adjustments, not a new direction. When more life-changing events occur—like the 2001 fire that destroyed Farmland Foods (aka Wilson Packing Company)—we react by finding ways to make our community stronger, not to simply “recover.”

New challenges arise often in communities, and with each come an opportunity for positive change. Some industries may choose to leave Albert Lea, while others will seize the opportunity to grow here. A long term campaign to revitalize our lakes has become a movement that is revitalizing our community.

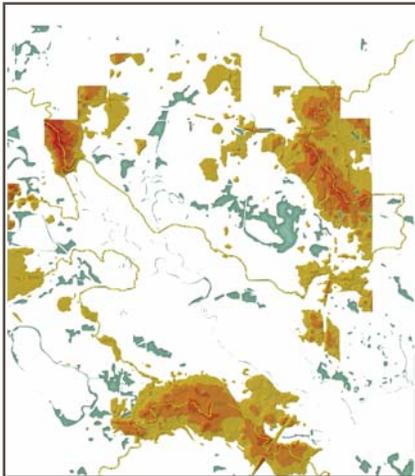
The process for planning—a challenge in itself—is our opportunity to respond to the community vision, recognize change, and establish a new framework to continue our progress and manage change. We looked to the land first—a

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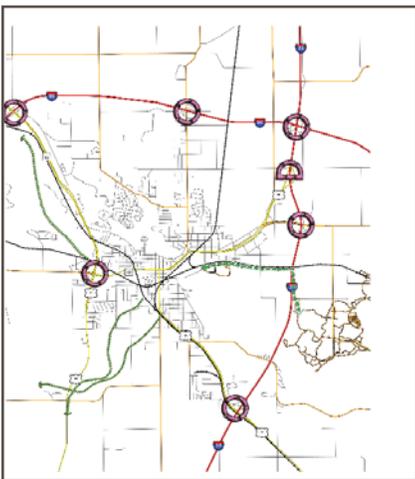
Our Comprehensive Plan is equally dynamic. We must be open to change while staying true to our Vision and Guiding Principles.



Lakes and waterways



Valleys and ridges



Movement corridors

logical move for a community with the natural assets that surround us, trying to find ways that would link us more directly with those features that set us apart as a community in southern Minnesota. We've defined a pattern of interconnected waterways and lakes, ridges and wetlands, parks and trail corridors. We've layered upon that pattern one that recognizes the way that rail corridors and roads—so often seen as barriers—can become seams in our community landscape. Then we began the process of laying out patterns of human use and activity as the foundation of our comprehensive plan. This approach blends both function and character of the landscape in a way that supports land use—human use and activity—while maintaining a sense of constancy with the land where we started.

We know that market forces and the economy shape current and future opportunities for change, but we also know that we have choices to make about how growth is accommodated. We choose to pursue growth that promotes an engaging sense of community and promotes the qualities of our natural environment. We have created a place with a resilient economy, where families are the foundation of the community.

Our choices are framed in this comprehensive plan. It embodies our aspirations as a community, and our hopes for our common future. Our plan is not a set of rules, however; it is a framework for how we make decisions—as a community, as an elected or appointed decision-maker, or as someone looking to invest in our community.

***Our comprehensive plan is a dynamic plan. It is not a set of “rules” but instead a framework for how we make decisions. It guides our investment in public infrastructure, directs our response to development requests outside of our boundaries, supports and shapes our development laws, lets us dream but recognizes reality, prioritizes projects and ideas, makes us accountable, tells a story, communicates what is desired and sustains our great community. Our plan is an invaluable tool that is used by our leaders and City Staff, our business community and our citizenry.***

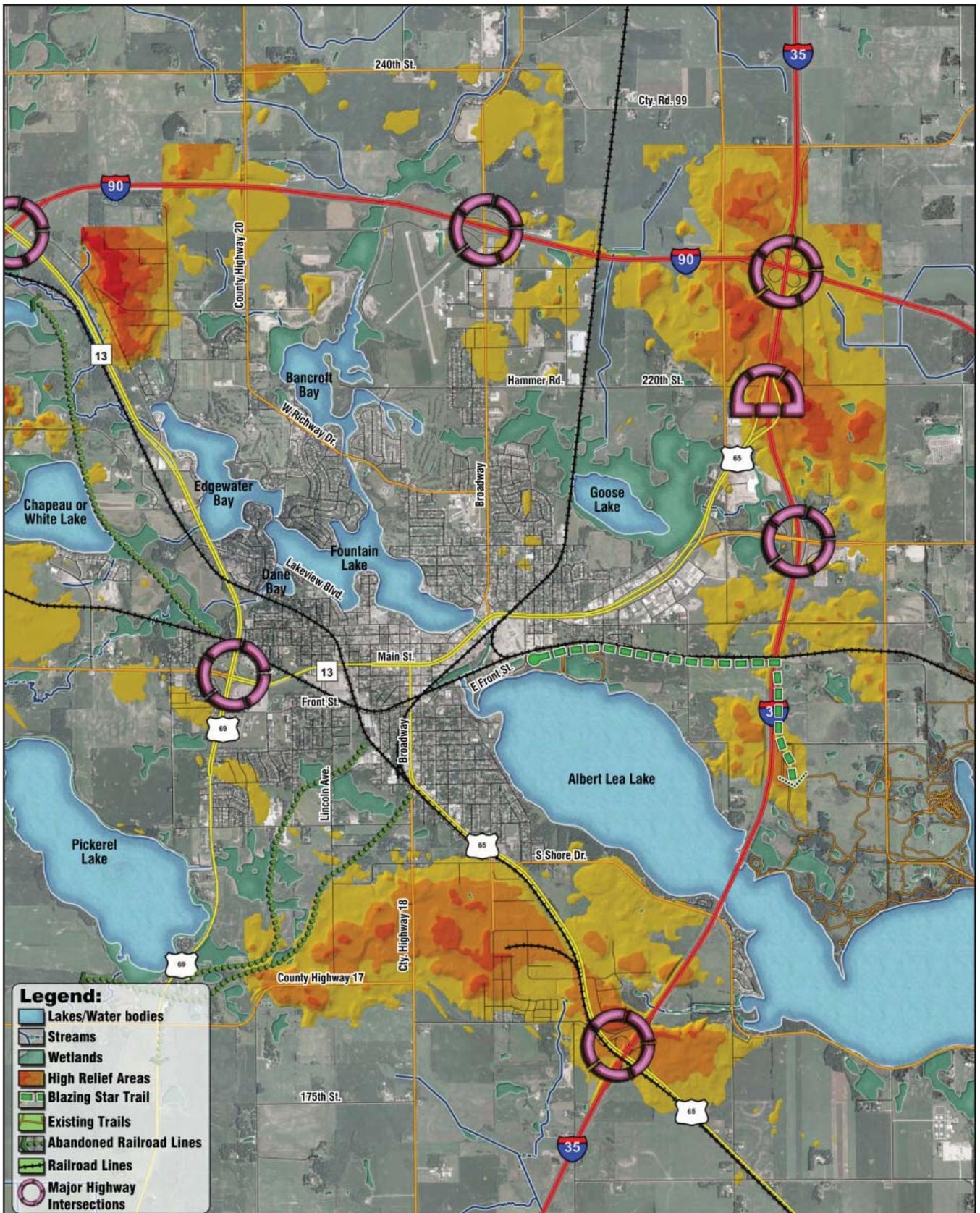
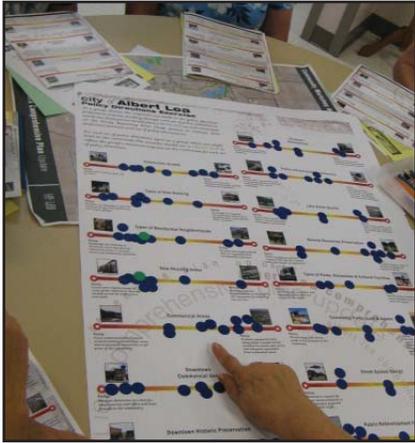


Figure 1-1 Existing lakes, ridges, waterways and movement corridors provide definition to Albert Lea.



*A key part of the planning process was to discuss patterns, trends and philosophies in planning and community design, agreeing on preferred directions.*

*The terms “green design”, “bio-regionalism” and “carbon neutrality” are part of a movement towards growing communities and living our lives in a more sustainable way.*

## **Waves and Ripples**

The story of Albert Lea’s growth and development may not be easily understood from the ground, but it’s an interesting journey through a series of development patterns and economic forces, with choices having been made throughout that journey that have shaped—and continue to shape—our community. As we look forward, we will be faced with many of the same kinds of choices, and the prudence of our recommendations may only be recognized by future generations of Albert Lea residents. Still, while we look forward with careful thought, we can attempt to understand the broader implications of those choices and decisions that were made by our predecessors.

It’s not unusual that in today’s society we study patterns and trends in an attempt to predict the next wave. We don’t want to be caught off-guard and always trying to simply keep up. So we try hard to figure out what’s coming next.

We do the same in planning, recognizing economic shifts, changes in transportation patterns, and even the trends in housing as new home types are introduced to the market. Sometimes those trends become movements with the resulting forces having great power to influence our communities—like the anti-sprawl and New Urbanism movements, which have refocused efforts on existing communities in some cases, or have built a stronger awareness of the social patterns of towns or even the value of more town-like character in others. Sustainable development, green design, bio-regionalism, and carbon neutrality—all ideas focused on a similar theme—may be another important movement shaping our communities, recognizing that the choices we make as individuals and as a society—even on a very local scale—can impact our future on the planet. These are all waves, and their effect will certainly be felt in Albert Lea.

In comparison, Albert Lea’s waves are probably more like ripples. But in their way, they have shaped our community from its very beginnings, and the next round of ripples will be those that we use to shape the next 10 or 20 or 50 years of growth in Albert Lea. It’s important to understand that there have already been “waves” in Albert Lea that have resulted in development patterns that have become relatively fixed.

### *Early ripples*

Early in Albert Lea’s history, a settlement was founded on a hill near the shores of Albert Lea Lake. A slough to the north of the lake was dammed up for water power to run a mill and Fountain Lake was formed. The development of a mill where water power could be found and the advent of the railroad both worked to allow the growth of a town on a hill and near the lake. This first round of development was compact and focused, as one would expect for a new town of that era. Eventually this area became the core of the community, generally



Fountain Lake Postcard ca 1915

coinciding with today's downtown Albert Lea, but importantly, it established some of the first patterns of development in the community—maybe the first ripple. With its wide streets and well-crafted buildings, today's downtown stands as a hint of the economic prosperity envisioned by early residents and reflective of the first century of progress in Albert Lea.

Now, some 150 years after the first buildings were constructed, the community has found the need to invest in some of its treasures, to maintain their basic integrity, to preserve their presence for the benefit of the community, and to entice private investment to this part of our community. These needs won't diminish; instead, we need to recognize the investment that this first ripple requires to keep it a vibrant part of the Albert Lea community.

Perhaps Fountain Lake was the next ripple. With the damming of the Shell Rock River above Albert Lea Lake, and with some dredging of the slough, Fountain Lake was formed making it into the attraction it is today. Roads extending outward from the downtown area formed new neighborhoods and growth in areas more remote from the core of Albert Lea. What's important about this ripple is that it focused so directly on a natural resource, albeit one that had help from inventive early residents, and that it occurred with an understanding that areas along the lake's edges might someday become an important public space.

Another early ripple was in 1943 when we created Greater Jobs Inc. in anticipation of the need to have jobs for returning WWII veterans, a national wave. From this wave some of our first early industries such as Universal Milking Machine Division of National Cooperatives Inc. and the Streater Companies emerged and our early industries like American Gas and Stove Company (among many others) re-emerged or expanded.

The stories of Fountain Lake and Greater Jobs Inc will hopefully prove instructive for the future of the community. These waves and ripples are clear demonstrations of the progressive planning done by our community.

### More contemporary ripples

The interstates brought a new focus to Albert Lea, and in 1972 the community responded with a plan that suggested significant growth—anywhere from 30,000 to 70,000 people might have populated Albert Lea in the scenarios framed in that plan. While that growth has not yet materialized, some patterns did: the Main Street East corridor was cultivated with opportunities for commercial use, perhaps on a more regional scale than seen previously in Albert Lea. This ripple was predicated on patterns that relied upon the automobile, with ever larger stores occupying ever larger sites, surrounded by parking and more remote from most of Albert Lea's residents but at the same time more accessible to people throughout the region.



Historic Building Renovation-- Freeborn Bank



Historical photos capture the vibrancy and innovations of our community that continues to express itself today.

When all roads crossed in downtown, it was the center of the regional economy. As freeways were constructed, the regional economy responded by moving toward the new highways to capture new traffic.

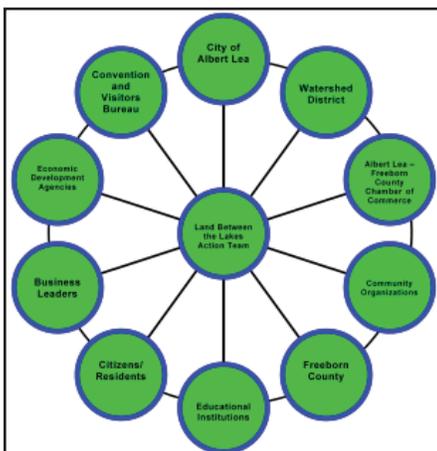
This was a period of significant growth. As planning and design philosophies have changed in the market place over the years, development has tended to be more focused on generating economic success. Economic success and quality design are very much related. We might push for good design, while understanding economic challenges when working with developers knowing that usually they are willing to go beyond what they've done in the past as they construct new buildings and shape new sites. While this wave might have begun with an orientation to economics—bringing goods, services, and jobs to Albert Lea, there is an increasing perspective that local character needs to be a part of the mix. What's encouraging is that developers are recognizing the need for character as well.

The community gave its consent to a local option sales tax that would be used to improve the water quality in our lakes. While it's not the same kind of “development” evidenced in previous waves, it could have as great an impact on our community's future as any of the others. It's also significant because it's something we chose for ourselves—we decided, together, that this was a necessary step toward our future. It's rooted in sustainability and the environment, but it also recognizes economics as an initiative that preserves a resource that has economic value for our community.

*In 2004, our community embarked upon a strategic planning process that engaged over 600 members of the community in a dialogue about our future.*

*Through that process, “Albert Lea Listens”, three themes emerged: business development and job creation; community appearance and attitude; and, recreation and cultural amenities.*

*A series of focus groups comprised of our citizens refined these themes and developed a strategic action plan.*



*The keys to successful implementation of the plan and realization of our vision lie in our hands.*

*Our comprehensive plan builds on many of the directions and ideas first established through the Albert Lea Listens community initiative.*

### Next waves

Each of the previous waves have recognized both the resources of the community and the economic opportunities of their time, perhaps in varying degrees. Future waves—those created as a result of this plan—will seek a fair balance, knowing that what is consumed in resources cannot be easily reclaimed.

When we look to the future, we can also look to those patterns that long preceded any of the patterns that are obvious today. Albert Lea, as a community, is framed by a series of lakes, low ridges, and waterways located on the edge of the prairie and hardwood forest. Together, they essentially form a ring around what could readily be conceived as our community, and like a building's foundation, they form the basic structure upon which we can build our future as a community. (See figure on page 3.)

This plan suggests there are other waves that are the responsibility of this generation, based on both assumptions for the future and actions—big and small—that might be pursued. Perhaps the most significant of these is the Southwest Greensward, a pattern of development that reaches in a southwest direction (maybe the only direction that has not seen a wave in its past) from the center of Albert Lea. The Southwest Greensward (“greensward” is a term applied to



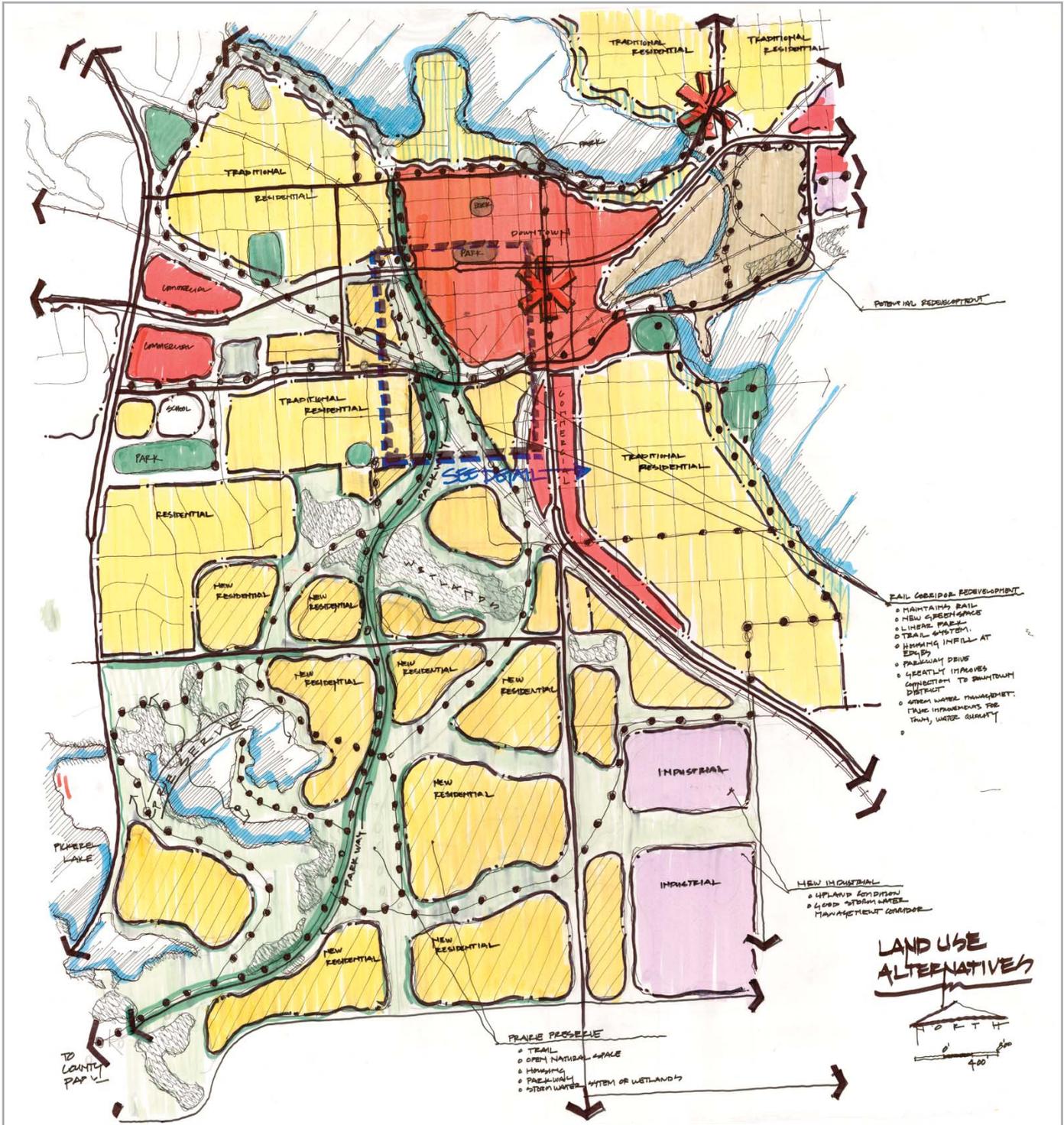


Figure 1-3 Land Use Schematic: Development patterns in Albert Lea can be seen following logical corridors, and in most cases, tracking the paths of major roads. The Southwest Greensward traces a broad swath of land the encompasses rail corridors and routes of water movement, beginning near downtown and reaching to the edges of the community, and resulting over time in a string of neighborhoods and other uses woven into a fabric of boulevards, trails, and the natural landscape.



A concept was developed for the former Farmland Foods. Key principles for the ultimate use of this site include:

- a mix of uses that support and compliment downtown Albert Lea (hotel/convention, mid density to high density housing, office or destination oriented retail)
- iconic architecture and site design that maximize views to and from the lakes and downtown
- a site design pattern that serves as a point of connection between Fountain Lake and Albert Lea Lake
- an ecologically friendly design that protects water quality
- an area that is “public” in its appearance and predominant pattern of land use.

Blazing Star Landing represents another wave, this time reclaiming land that lies idle after a devastating fire at the Farmland Foods facility. Today, this site lies essentially at the juncture of Fountain Lake and Albert Lea Lake, and between downtown Albert Lea and the East Main Street commercial corridor. It also anchors the Blazing Star Trail, a pedestrian and bicycle trail that links Albert Lea with Big Island State Park (and someday may be extended to Austin, the Shooting Star Trail, and Hayward). While the area of Blazing Star Landing may be small in comparison to the Southwest Greensward, it stands in a location where it might dramatically influence the future of Albert Lea.

Reaching outward from Blazing Star Landing, the plan proposes a reinvention of Front Street as an east-west parkway and a way of accommodating movement that cannot easily happen on Main Street. Blazing Star Parkway becomes an extension of the energy of Blazing Star Landing, bringing opportunities for new development and redevelopment along its length.

Our historic Downtown serves as the core of Albert Lea and the unifying element of the Blazing Star Landing and the Southwest Greensward. Downtown serves not only as the core of Albert Lea, but as the core of a greater region. Today, it

Figure 1-5 Concept for Blazing Star Landing site.





Active, functional sidewalk character.



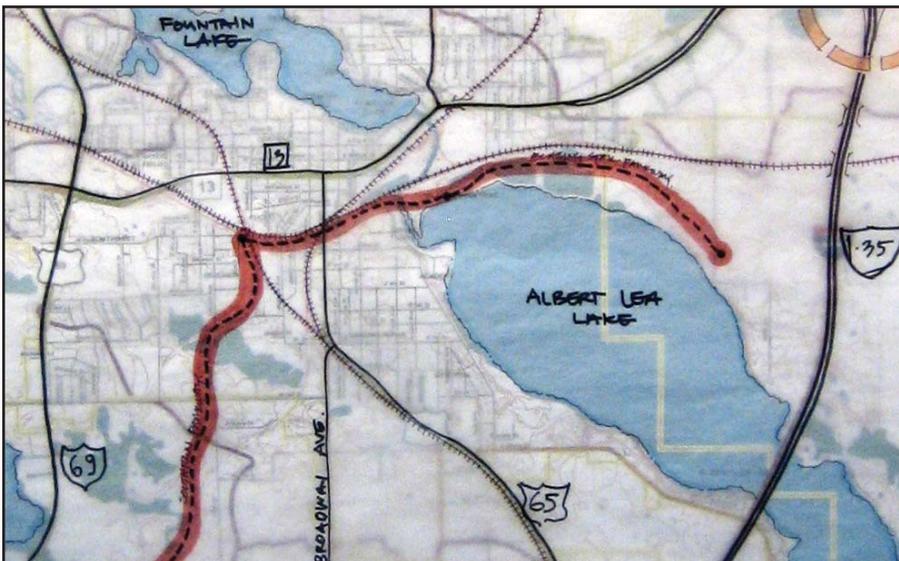
Pocket park in downtown setting.



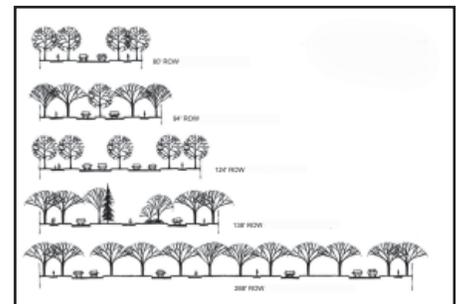
Strong connection to water.

is the center for government and financial services. As we look to the future we see our downtown evolving to bring back the life that once was. We recognize the value of the early waves of growth when buildings and architecture presented opportunities to leave a legacy. A sense of energy has been restored to downtown Albert Lea with the expansion of the Medical Center, which serves as a catalyst for new housing, jobs, entertainment venues, and tourism and reinvestment in existing infrastructure systems.

Figure 1-6 Concept for extension of Front Street.



A concept explores the idea of connecting west and east Albert Lea with a pedestrian friendly “strolling” boulevard/parkway that could serve as a catalyst for future redevelopment and revitalization in connection with the Blazing Star Landing and the Greensward.

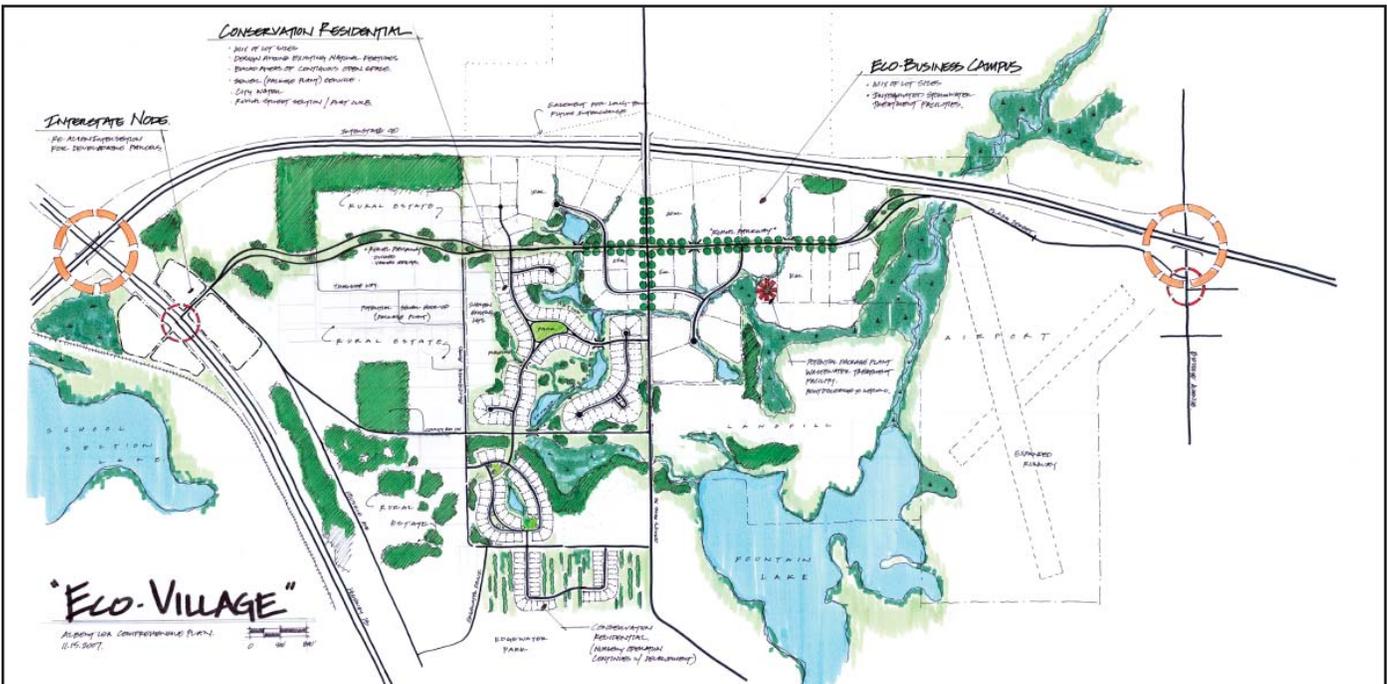




A package plant system above in blue. A building designed to house the system and blend into adjacent development.

The north side of Albert Lea is often overlooked. The early waves saw this area relegated to land intensive uses (i.e. airport and landfill). I-90 does not play nearly the same role as I-35 does in connecting regional centers. Early development patterns saw this area develop ahead of the City’s ability to provide municipal services. Today, we see new opportunity to capitalize on the push for alternative energy sources such as wind energy, or the capture of methane gasses from the landfill. We see opportunity to correct a problem (failing private septic systems) by exploring alternative (innovative) waste water treatment systems. These alternative approaches to development will enable us to preserve a desired lifestyle, that otherwise might not be feasible. It also provides Albert Lea with a market strategy for new industry that seeks alternative energy sources. As we explored alternatives for the area north of Fountain Lake, we came across the term Eco Village, which captures the character of this area with or without a future interchange at County Highway 20 (Bath Road) and I-90.

Figure 1-7 Concept for Eco-Village.



The Eco Village concept provides a sustainable community development alternative for the area of Albert Lea around the Bath Road overpass. Two primary components guide future land use, an eco-industrial park located along the southern edge of Interstate 90 and a range of low-density residential options. The eco-industrial concept centers on involving a network of businesses and organizations, which work together to improve their environmental and economic performance. The residential land uses south and west of the eco-industrial park range from large, un-sewered lots to smaller lots designed within a conservation development framework built around existing drainage patterns and vegetation. The smaller lots, along with the industrial uses, would utilize a package plant system for wastewater treatment to reduce the infrastructure costs of extending sanitary sewer to this northern most area of the city.

The interchange area at I-35 and CSAH 46th (East Main Street) represents an area that has begun to realize the market forces of being located adjacent to an interstate highway. Recent developments have resulted in three of the four quadrants of this intersection becoming regional truck stop and auto service centers tailoring to the public traveling through, but not necessarily into Albert Lea. Given the presence of the interstate highway we recognize and respect the value and contribution of auto and truck oriented uses. We also envision the interchange area as a gateway into our community that warrants an iconic presence on the roadway announcing your arrival to our community. We see the design of streets, infrastructure systems and community gateways within interchange areas as a key to announcing Albert Lea as the “land between the lakes.”

Bridge Avenue serves as a gateway into our community from the north. It is a major thoroughfare into our community and major contributor to our economy providing access for shopping and delivery of goods. Over time, Bridge Avenue will experience greater traffic pressures, particularly when our vision for a strengthened downtown is realized and more people live, work, shop and visit downtown Albert Lea. Our vision for Bridge Avenue is for a roadway that is safe, attractive, efficient and functional. We believe that this vision can be achieved through strategic improvements, access management and wise future land use decisions.

*Smaller ripples*

If the Southwest Greensward, Blazing Star Landing and Downtown, Blazing Star Parkway, Eco Village, Interchange and Bridge Avenue are the big ripples, there are still a series of smaller ripples that are significant:

- ▶ *Relocating residents of the mobile home park to new or rehabilitated homes nearer to the center of the community, allowing for a logical expansion of the industrial park area while infusing older neighborhoods with new life;*
- ▶ *Providing redundant neighborhood connections for those neighborhoods currently served by only a single access point, and accommodating more than just cars along those routes;*
- ▶ *Defining a logical boundary for Albert Lea’s emergency service area that coincides with features that are recognizable as boundaries and offers key areas the most time-responsive emergency services possible;*
- ▶ *Establishing incentives and programs that encourage investment in existing neighborhoods, especially those that lie nearer to downtown (in particular as the community expands with new neighborhoods in currently undeveloped areas);*
- ▶ *Providing infrastructure to areas of the community that are currently un-served (or underserved), using methods that serve development and maintain the essential character of the landscape, without placing the brunt of the costs on the community; and*



*Gateway features into Albert Lea announce ones arrival into the community. Common gateways are expressed through signage. Our plan suggests that gateways might also be reflected through streetscape patterns, landscaping features or public art.*

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- ▶ *Creating a program aimed at revitalizing the downtown in a holistic way—not just preserving old buildings but helping existing businesses better understand the nuances of a downtown market and customer environment and integrating new housing into downtown.*

These next waves are also founded on a few fundamental assumptions about how the community will grow:

- ▶ *that downtown will be revitalized as a focus for commercial activity, with Blazing Star Landing becoming a new activity generator for both downtown and the community in general;*
- ▶ *that new housing opportunities will be integrated into and adjacent to downtown which infusing economic vitality and energy into downtown;*
- ▶ *that the efforts aimed toward water quality improvements will be successful and will continue to be supported by the community;*
- ▶ *that efforts will continue to maintain a sense of compactness in the growth patterns of the community, prioritizing infrastructure investments to maintain and enhance what we already have;*
- ▶ *that the community will seek a proper balance of new development on the edges and redevelopment near the core, as well as a balance in the types of development that are pursued;*
- ▶ *that neighborhoods can be created with vital parks and “green” connections as their focal points; and*
- ▶ *that alternative wastewater treatment options will be supported by regulators, relieving the pressure for expensive (and, in some cases, premature) infrastructure extensions.*