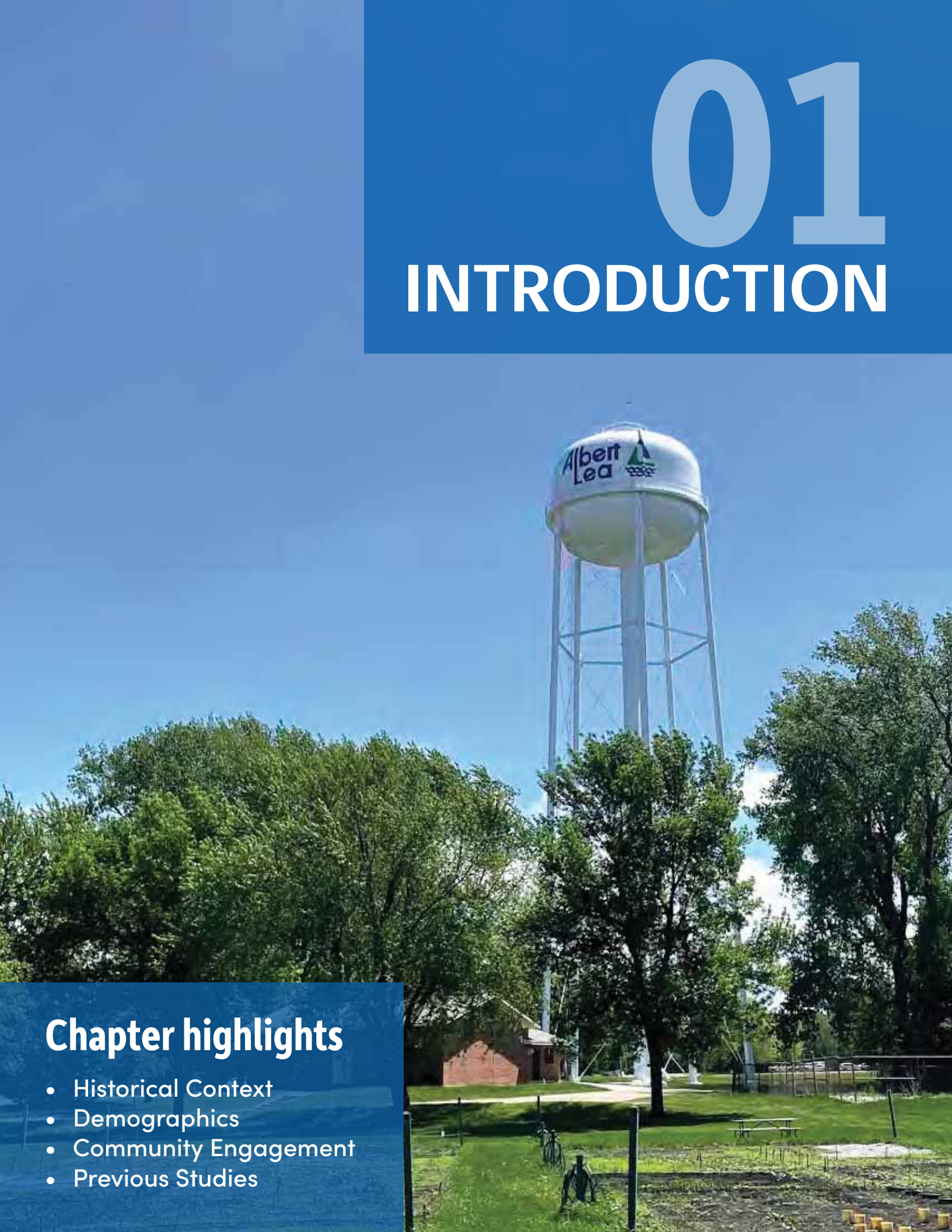


01

INTRODUCTION

Chapter highlights

- Historical Context
- Demographics
- Community Engagement
- Previous Studies





INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive plan is a long-range planning document intended to identify a community's vision, goals, and policies to guide future development and public investment. Simply put, a comprehensive plan describes the hopes, dreams, and aspirations a community holds for itself. Through public input, a comprehensive plan guides land uses and transportation patterns, identifies infrastructure needs, promotes historical preservation and the creation of parks and recreational areas, and identifies opportunities for economic development.

The City of Albert Lea's Comprehensive Plan is the policy document providing a foundation for growth and development. Growth is not just tied to an increase in population or land area. Growth includes changes in the cultural makeup of the city, and how the city chooses to address those changes, the character and type of businesses the city pursues, and the steps the city takes to address regional and global issues.

This plan provides an overview of Albert Lea's historical context, demographics, existing and future land use, economic climate, public utilities, transportation, natural resources and parks and trails. The Comprehensive Plan contains goals, objectives and policies to guide land use development, redevelopment, and preservation of all lands and waters within the city. It also proposes a plan to implement these policies through the 2040 timeframe.

A comprehensive plan is more than just a document. The process provided an opportunity to engage the public in local decisions and to allow people with different perspectives to articulate the sort of community they would like to live in and leave behind.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Albert Lea has been a hub of retail, manufacturing, agriculture, and transportation in southern Minnesota since becoming a village in 1870. In 1880, Albert Lea was home to approximately 1,966 residents just one year following its city charter designation from the Minnesota State Legislature. The multiple railroads passing through Albert Lea offered the city a diverse economy from the late 19th century onwards. Railroad lines such as the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, Milwaukee and Saint Paul, and Rock Island and Pacific offered transportation to grow the local economy in the manufacturing, wholesale groceries, sheet metal businesses, houseware, dairy products, meat processing, banking houses, and agricultural supply industries.

The connectivity of Albert Lea allowed the area to thrive economically and utilize the downtown. A retail district was formed along Broadway Avenue from Main Street to Water Street. The downtown housed office space, banks, retail stores, and an opera house. By 1935, more than 40 wholesale and manufacturing businesses offered nearly 3,000 jobs within Albert Lea. Albert Lea's industries following World War II led to the creation of one of the nation's first industrial parks. Following World War II, the automobile industry gathered near highway strips and shaped the future of retail development in Albert Lea.

The State of Minnesota developed Interstates 35 and 90 near Albert Lea in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to development along the corridor. This development urged Albert Lea to increase city planning efforts beyond the existing charter that was established in 1934. Albert Lea's first comprehensive plan from 1948 was updated in 1972 to include new elements of the interstate system. In 2004, Albert Lea coordinated with Freeborn County to develop a Strategic Action Plan.



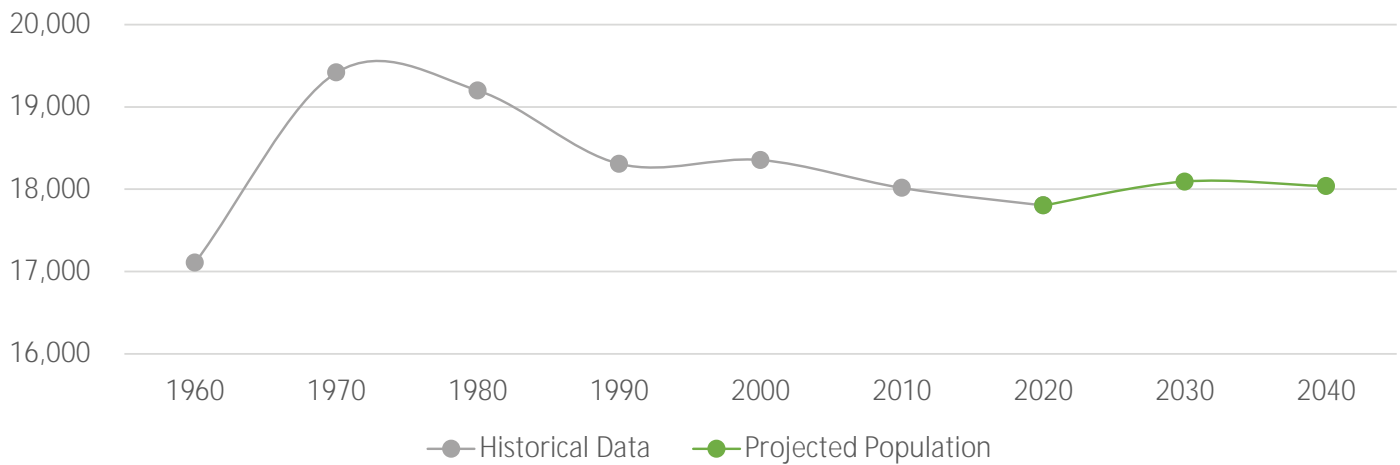
DEMOGRAPHICS

Meticulous planning for a community should include an analysis of the demographics of the area. Careful assessment of demographic data can influence the physical development of a community because physical and social elements are closely intertwined. Evaluating demographic data can guide the planning process to recognize the current and future needs of a community. Variables such as race, age, housing type, income, and employment influence the future development of a community.

Population

During its first century as a city, the population of Albert Lea grew at a steady pace. The population peaked at 19,418 people in 1970. In the 2020 census, Albert Lea’s population was 18,492, lower than the 1970 peak, but a 2.6% increase from 2010. Figure 1-1 shows the population trends from 1960 to 2040. Population growth projections show a slight increase of 2% over the next 20 years.

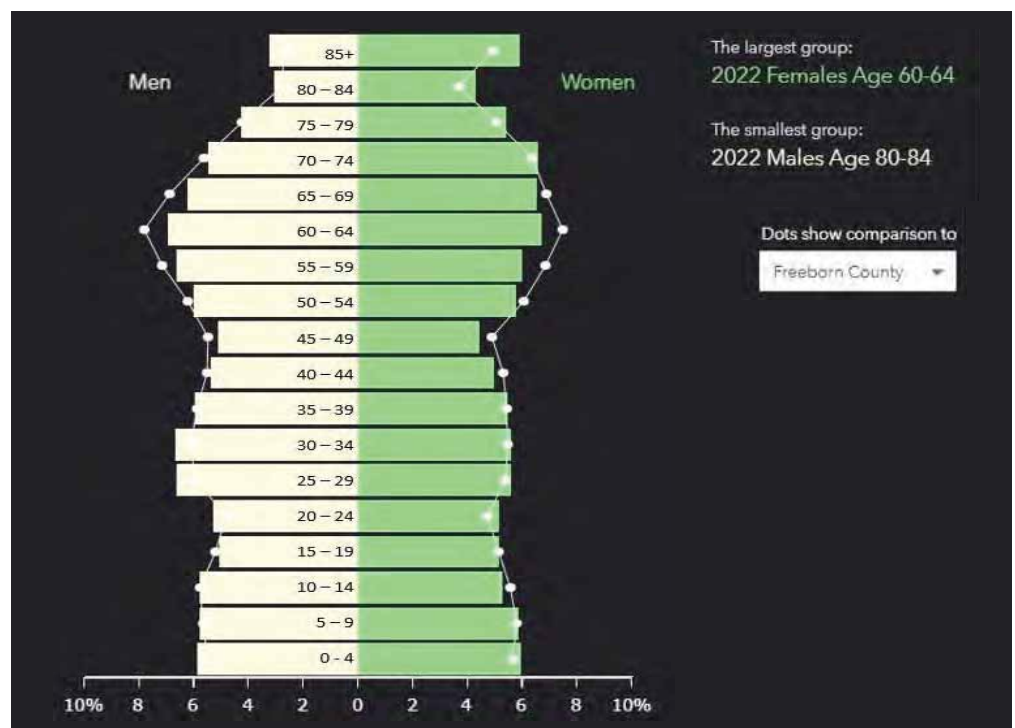
FIGURE 1-1 POPULATION TRENDS



Age

Figure 1-2 shows an age pyramid for Albert Lea in comparison to Freeborn County. The largest age group of Albert Lea residents are females aged 60 – 64 while the smallest age group are males aged 80 – 84. The median age in Albert Lea is 44.3 years.

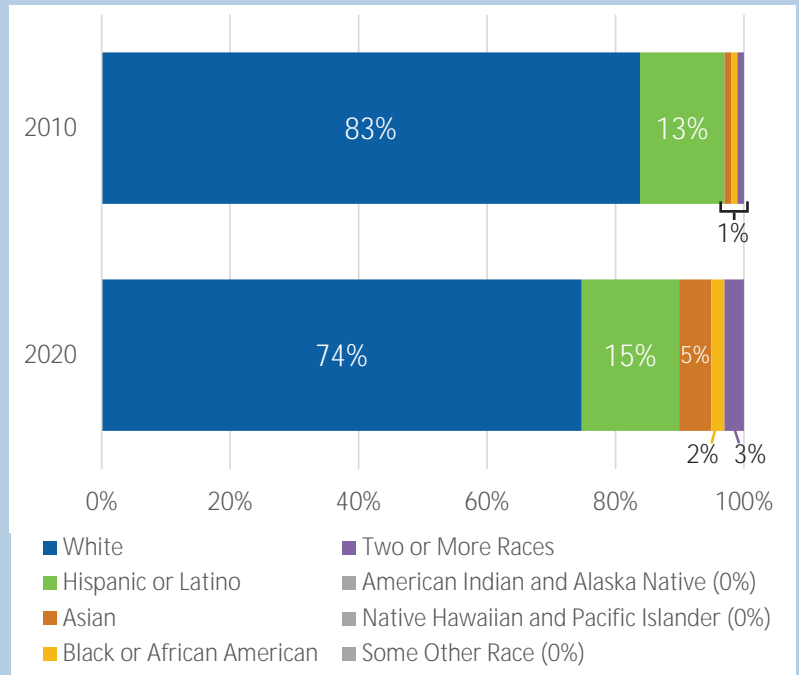
FIGURE 1-2 AGE DISTRIBUTION



Race and Ethnicity

The overall population growth in Albert Lea is expected to remain relatively stable over the next 20 years; however, the make-up of the community is continuing to evolve. Albert Lea, along with all of Freeborn County, is becoming more diverse. According to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), from 2010 to 2020, Freeborn County saw an increase in the number of foreign-born residents, which was faster than the statewide increase, and the county's white population declined, but the number of people of other races increased. In Albert Lea specifically, the percentage of the white population fell from 90 percent in 2010 to 78 percent in 2020. Figure 1-3 illustrates the change in the makeup of Albert Lea's population between 2010 and 2020.

FIGURE 1-3 POPULATION BY RACE (2010 - 2020)



Housing

Albert Lea currently has 7,895 households. The average household size in Albert Lea is 2.3 occupants and is slightly below the average household size for Freeborn County at 2.32 occupants. Figure 1-4 shows the make up of home values in Albert Lea with the median home value being \$124,045. Figure 1-5 demonstrates the age of the housing stock. The largest percent of homes in Albert Lea was built prior to the 1940s. More than 70 percent of Albert Lea residents own their homes as shown in Figure 1-6.

FIGURE 1-4 ALBERT LEA MEDIAN HOME VALUE

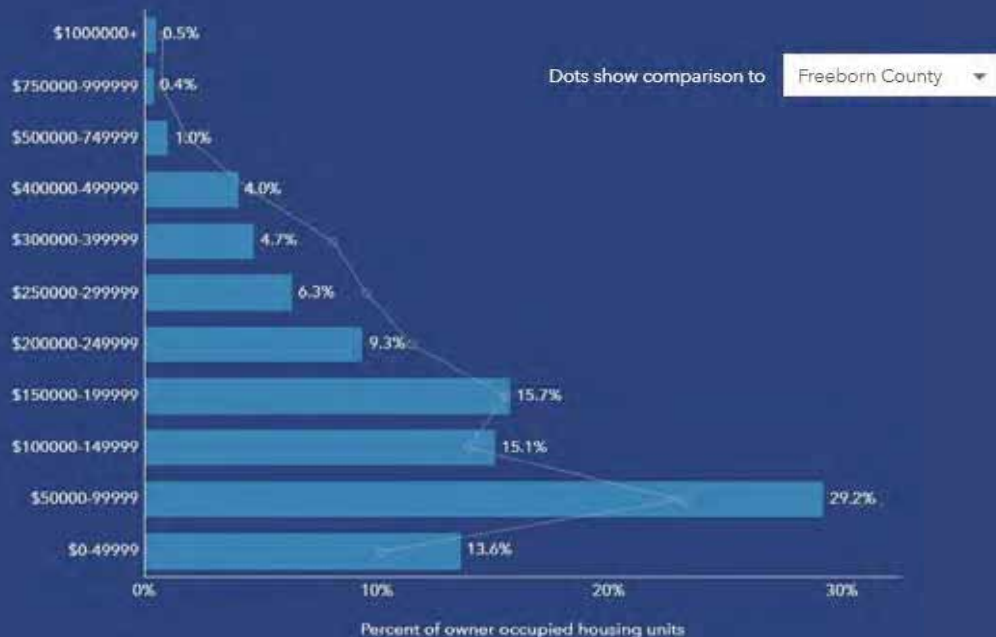
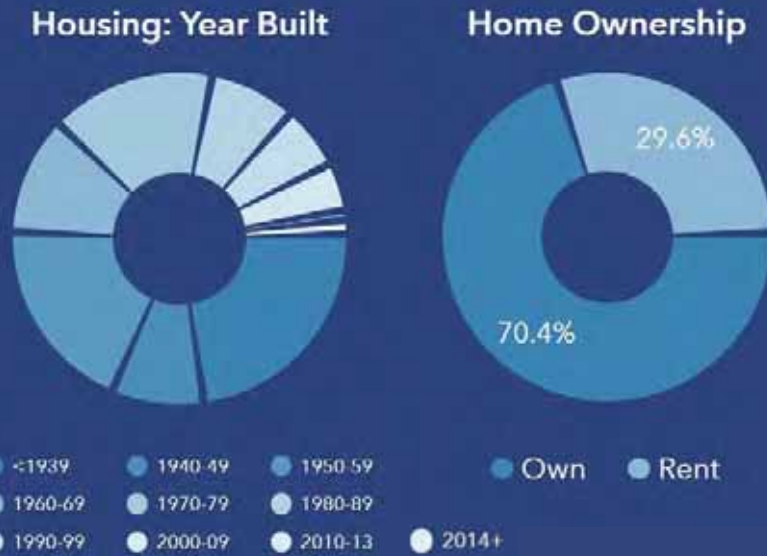


FIGURE 1-5 & 1-6 ALBERT LEA MEDIAN HOME AGE AND OWNERSHIP RATES



Income

The median household income for Albert Lea residents is \$55,372. Figure 1-7 and Figure 1-8 illustrate the range of incomes for Albert Lea residents.

FIGURE 1-7 HOUSEHOLD INCOME

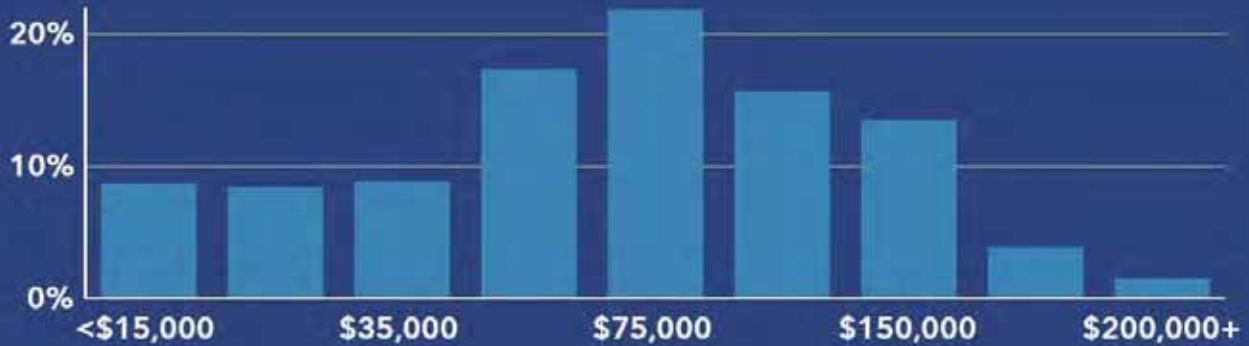


FIGURE 1-8 HOUSEHOLDS BY INCOME

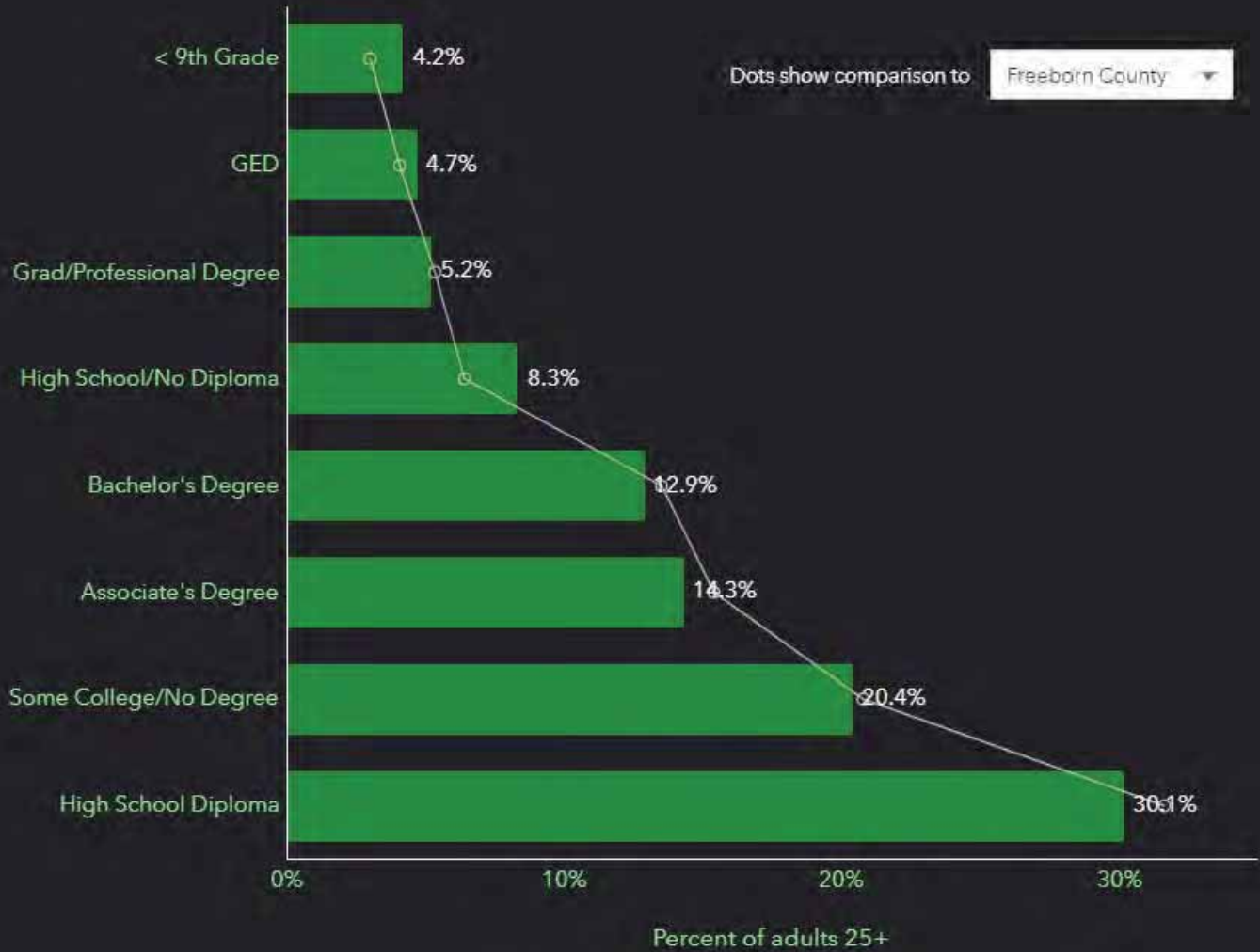
Income Bracket	Current %	Change %	Deviation
\$200,000+	1.6%	-0.9%	Green bar
\$150,000 - \$199,999	3.9%	-1.6%	Green bar
\$100,000 - \$149,999	13.5%	-2.6%	Green bar
\$75,000 - \$99,999	15.7%	-1.8%	Green bar
\$50,000 - \$74,999	21.9%	-0.1%	Green bar
\$35,000 - \$49,999	17.4%	+2.4%	Yellow bar
\$25,000 - \$34,999	8.9%	+0.9%	Yellow bar
\$15,000 - \$24,999	8.5%	+1.5%	Yellow bar
<\$15,000	8.7%	+2.2%	Yellow bar

*Bars show deviation from Freeborn County

Educational Attainment

Approximately 12 percent of Albert Lea residents did not receive a high school diploma, while 35 percent of residents are high school graduates. Thirty-five percent of residents have an educational attainment of some college, and 18 percent of residents have a bachelor's, graduate, or other professional degree.

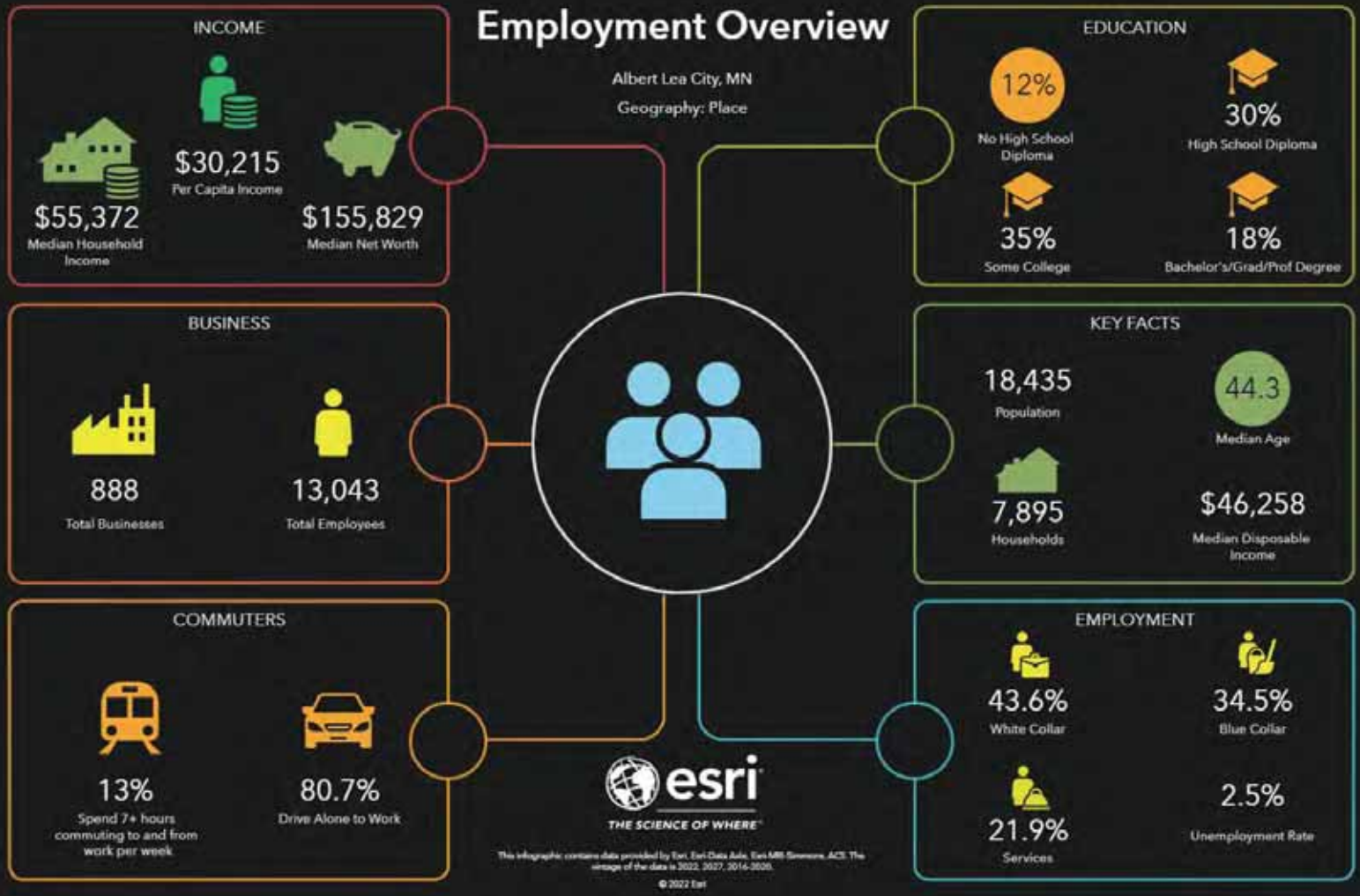
FIGURE 1-9 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



Employment and Labor Force

Albert Lea has a labor force of approximately 888 businesses with 13,043 employees. The production industry is the largest sector of employment in Albert Lea with 13.5 percent of business being production. The second largest sector is transportation with 11.2 percent; 43.6 percent of jobs in Albert Lea are considered white collar, 34.5 percent of jobs are considered blue collar, and 21.9 percent of jobs fall within services. Approximately 2.5 percent of Albert Lea's population is unemployed.

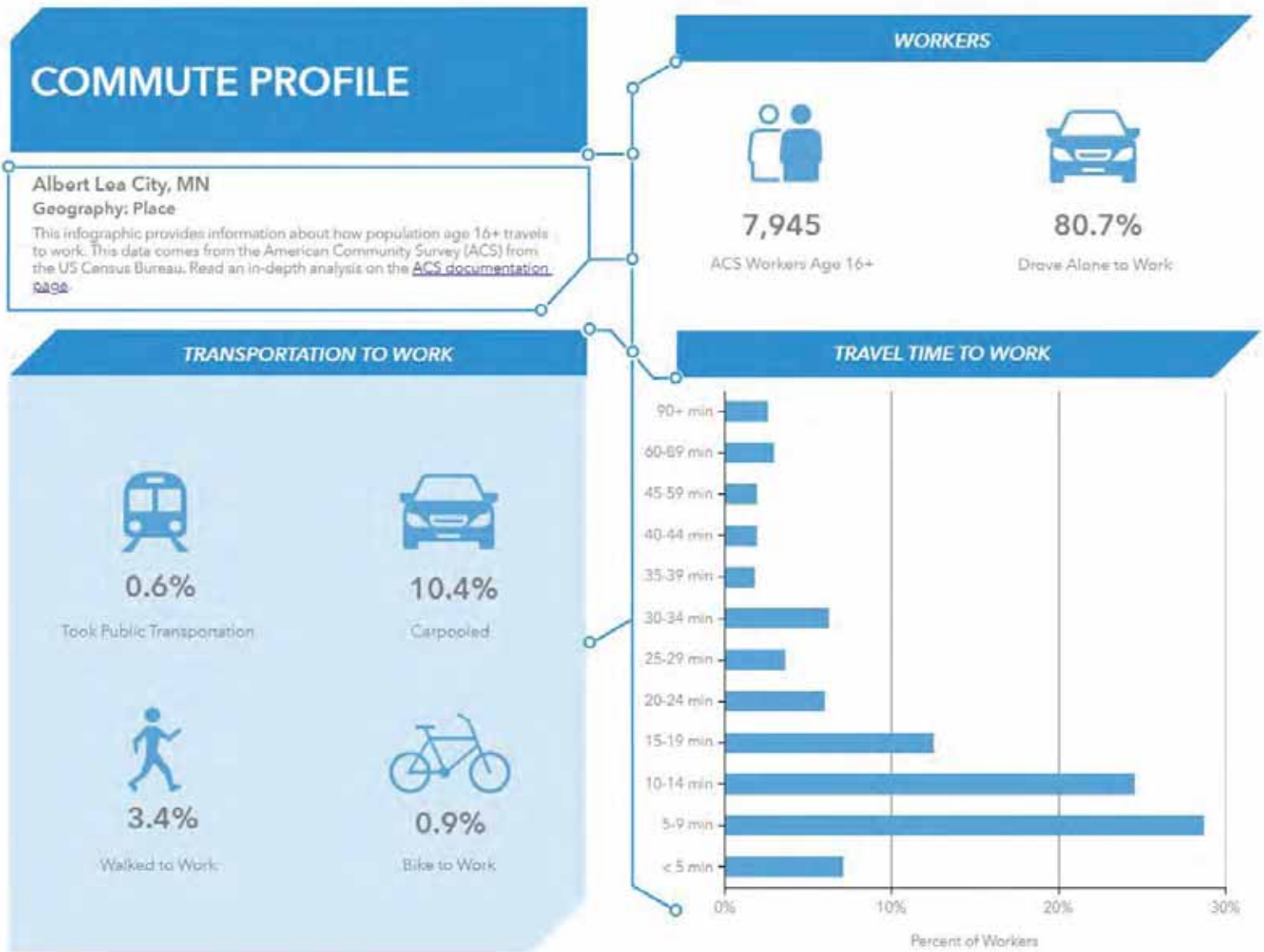
FIGURE 1-10 EMPLOYMENT OVERVIEW



Employment and Labor Force

More than 80 percent of Albert Lea residents drive alone to work. Some residents either carpool (10.4 percent) or walk to work (3.4 percent). Commute times for most Albert Lea residents are between five and nine minutes.

FIGURE 1-11 COMMUTE PROFILE



This infographic contains data provided by American Community Survey (ACS). The vintage of the data is 2016-2020.

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Section Overview

- Steering Committee
- Visioning and SWOT
- Goals
- Land Use and Mapping
- Draft Chapters and Implementation
- Survey
- Focus Groups and Events

Steering Committee

The City of Albert Lea held a series of steering committee meetings to gather local knowledge for the 2040 Comprehensive Plan Update. The meetings were held to discuss the direction of the update, assess public input survey results, execute a SWOT analysis, and explore goals for Albert Lea. The steering committee provided valuable information about the current state of Albert Lea while discussing how to guide opportunities for growth and development.

Visioning and SWOT

The first steering committee meeting focused on gathering a consensus about Albert Lea through a visioning session and SWOT analysis. Attendees reflected on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) that face Albert Lea in addition to what Albert Lea means to them. The main strengths of Albert Lea, according to the steering committee, included a beautiful and well-maintained built environment, a high-quality school system, and strong local leadership. The weaknesses discussed consisted of limited access to healthcare and social services, a lack of community bonding of all demographics, and limited winter activities, especially for teens. Main ideas for opportunities included diversifying available jobs and increasing the number of recreational activities to take advantage of the landscape. The threats discussed included the lack of industrial land which limits certain types of expansion and the lack of adequate childcare which restricts families from moving to Albert Lea and taking advantage of job opportunities.

Table 1-1 is a summary of what the committee said when asked the following questions:

What is Albert Lea?	What excites you about Albert Lea?	What challenges is Albert Lea facing?	What is your favorite place in Albert Lea?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small, close-knit and involved community • Home and destination • Major intersection of highway/interstate • Cost of living & quality of life • History • Big cultural and social events • Nature and outdoors • Giving, caring, passionate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Momentum and potential • Festivals and events • History • Working together • Welcoming new residents and visitors • 1st industrial park in USA • Public art 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of housing (incl. options and affordability) • Representation and engagement • Healthcare/childcare • Economic diversity workforce shortage project funding • Young professionals/family retention • Senior support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lakes and natural environment • Downtown/Broadway • Art center, library, museum • Outdoor activities, trails, parks • Businesses (restaurant, Whimzy, etc.)



Table 1-2 is a summary of the SWOT analysis:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town beauty • Care and desire for a better community • Local leadership • Infrastructure • Riverland Community College • Community events • Farmers market • Passion, diversity, jobs • Outdoors/nature • Schools • People 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach and engagement • Indoor winter activities • Need more music events • Food access • Healthcare access/cost • Activities for kids/teens • No homeless shelters or resources • Isolation • Lack of communication/sense of community among neighbors
Opportunities	Threat
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism • Workforce training • Industrial growth/economic diversity • Lake/outdoors/parks • Diversity • Collaboration/building on momentum • Developable land • Work from home • Outdoors/nature • Schools • Partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location • Lack of available land • Flooding • Unfunded wastewater plant • Lack of housing (options and affordable) • Healthcare/childcare • Aging housing stock • Work from home • Few activities for youth • Negativity

Goals

A second steering committee meeting was held to consider goals for Albert Lea. The goals were related to the main four sections of the comprehensive plan: Built, Social, Economic, and Natural Environment. Goals for the built environment included creating affordable housing, investing in a multimodal transportation system, and maintaining public infrastructure such as the water treatment system. Social environment goals centered on branding for Albert Lea with wayfinding and other signage in addition to additional community events and volunteer opportunities. Economic goals included supporting diverse businesses and several types of restaurants while providing the social infrastructure to support the businesses. The goals for the natural environment were to support green energy and increase access to natural resources such as trails and the lake.

Table 1-3 is a summary of the goals discussed during the meeting:

Built Environment	Social Environment	Natural Environment	Economic Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating affordable- and market-rate housing • Creating a multi-modal system • Expand and develop new industrial park • Expand and update recreational facilities • Keep ahead with technology in infrastructure • Strong wastewater treatment system • Support economic growth through infrastructure improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public art destination • Signage and branding • Expand and diversify events • Activate and engage community organizations and volunteers • Reactivate blue zones • Information translation and platform engagement • Build a new and improved “welcome wagon” • Support and connect with social services • Attract and expand healthcare/ childcare options • Build a community or rec center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finish bike trail • Expand bike infrastructure • Sustainability in waste with recycling and composting programs • Sustainability in jobs • Responsibly pursue green energy • Care for and maintain lakes • Provide opportunities for recreation • Explore creating a tourism office to coordinate attracting visitors through signage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attract companies and industries with sustainable workforce needs • Support economic expansion through the number of available housing units • Support and provide community-level services • Walk-/bike-ability • Business support programs • Small business diversification • Avoid inefficient sprawl • Define needs and direction for growth • Branding and signage

Land Use and Mapping

The third steering committee meeting focused on land use and envisioning change across the community through a mapping exercise. Some of the major land use takeaways included maintaining existing housing stock, building up density near major places and nodes, affordable housing, neighborhood commercial, adaptive reuse of buildings, and reusing former railroad corridors for trails. After the discussion on land use goals, the steering committee was separated into groups and each group was given a map of the city. On trace paper, the groups indicated areas for expansion, revitalization, trails, and preservation. The groups then traded maps and provided a different perspective on each part of the city.



Draft Chapters and Implementation

The fourth and fifth steering committee meetings focused on reviewing the draft chapters and implementation matrix worksheets. The fourth meeting focused on the major chapters and goals and sought feedback from the steering committee on the approach and organization. The fifth and final steering committee meeting allowed the group to view the implementation chapter information and proposed goals and action items. Each item had information on a potential level of effort and tools, along with benchmarks to monitor progress. The steering committee was asked to divide itself into three groups to review two chapters each. Each group member received a set number of dots in green and blue colors to place next to goals, objectives, or action items that interest them the most. Green dots denote a high priority and desire to complete in a short timeframe while blue dots denote a high priority but not an immediate need and could be viewed as a medium- or long-term item. After placing the first round of dots, the group was given a set number of dots to share, which required the group to discuss and agree on placing more dots to create a weighted system beyond just individual decisions. Below is a summary of the results, organized by topic and featuring the top voted elements for both green and blue dots.

Parks, Recreation, and Natural Resources

- Green (high priority, short term)
 - Adopt a communal identity through a wayfinding and gateway signage system for parkland and community gateways. (Action Item)
 - Improve the health of the community by providing spaces and activities to suit a variety of needs. (Objective) / Provide more opportunities for complete and walkable streets. (Action Item)
- Blue (high priority, medium-/long-term)
 - Improve the health of the community by providing spaces and activities to suit a variety of needs. (Objective) / Provide more opportunities for complete and walkable streets. (Action Item)
 - Promote healthy activity. (Objective) / Provide attractive opportunities for outdoor play, aimed at inter-generational and omni-skill levels, thereby providing safe spaces for youth after school. (Action Item)

Public Utilities and Facilities

- Green (high priority, short term)
 - Expand existing utility system infrastructure to meet the demands generated by continued development. (Goal)
 - (Tie vote) Maintain and operate public facilities at the highest possible level of service. (Goal) / Foster an environment for lifelong learning, growth, and cooperation. (Goal)
- Blue (high priority, medium-/long-term)
 - Maintain and operate public facilities at the highest possible level of service. (Goal)
 - Monitor, evaluate, and improve the condition of each utility system's infrastructure. (Goal)

Economic Development

- Green (high priority, short term)
 - Create a strong economic development system. (Goal) / Attract and retain successful businesses. (Objective)
 - Attract talent, retain residents, and increase levels of community engagement. (Goal) / Promote quality of life. (Objective)
- Blue (high priority, medium-/long-term)
 - Strengthen the work-skills pipeline. (Goal)
 - Prioritize activities to ensure the city and county are prepared for business growth opportunities. (Goal)

Housing

- Green (high priority, short term)
 - Expand housing choice and affordability. (Goal)
 - Preserve and enhance existing housing stock. (Goal)
- Blue (high priority, medium-/long-term)
 - (Tie vote) Expand housing choice and affordability. (Goal) / Preserve and enhance existing housing stock. (Goal) / Identify and prepare locations for multi-family development. (Action Item)

Transportation

- Green (high priority, short term)
 - Create quick and easy access to the surrounding areas of Albert Lea. (Action Item)
 - Expand bike and pedestrian trails that route from residential uses to destinations such as schools, parks, or commercial corridors. (Action Item)
- Blue (high priority, medium-/long-term)
 - (Tie vote) Identify high- and low-intensity land uses. (Action Item) / Expand bike and pedestrian trails that route from residential uses to destinations such as schools, parks, or commercial corridors. (Action Item) / Create new developments near roads with adequate carrying capacity. (Action Item) / Provide opportunities for various transportation options. (Action Item) / Place lighting in large open spaces. (Action Item) / Create a Bike and Pedestrian Masterplan. (Action Item)

Land Use

- Green (high priority, short term)
 - Encourage the preservation and enhancement of the city's single-family housing stock using city programs that incentivize the upkeep and maintenance of private property. (Action item)
 - Plan for appropriate amenities, high quality design, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and open space in high growth areas, particularly in the downtown mixed-use district and around neighborhood centers. (Action Item)
- Blue (high priority, medium-/long-term)
 - Support a diversification of housing types throughout the city, including the development of a tiny home park to support housing affordability. (Action Item)
 - (Tie vote) Support small local businesses, particularly in the areas of the city where new development is designated in the comprehensive plan. (Action Item) / Identify locations in the city which could support new and mixed-use development. (Action Item)



Survey

The public input survey was shared with the steering committee to help guide conversations for opportunities. Residents responded they were attracted by quality of life, location, cost of living, and being a close knit and engaged community. Survey results strongly expressed a desire to market Albert Lea programs to attract and support new businesses while leveraging existing strengths. Respondents were excited by outdoor recreation and opportunities for growth, especially downtown. Recreation is a major amenity and is used often. Most people (96%) drive alone as their primary mode of transportation. However, recreational biking and walking are big draws. Challenges and opportunities center on more housing and commercial growth, while growing the local workforce, and combating negative perceptions of the community.



Focus Groups and Events

ALEDA

One of the focus groups, the Albert Lea Economic Development Agency (ALEDA), provided insights into city growth and development from an economic point of view. The agency highlighted outdoor amenities, a welcoming community, cost of living, public-private partnerships, growth potential, and transportation access as ways Albert Lea's market attracts industry and economic development. On the inverse, a workforce and housing shortage, natural features like swamps and wetlands, distance to major metro areas, lack of available land and tenant spaces, and competition with Iowa were among some of the reasons why Albert Lea might not attract new housing development. When asked what Albert Lea's market niche is, agency members responded by stating that the city has a clear economic vision, company compatibility with the community, an established workforce, a strong agricultural sector, innovation, and a fairly diverse economic base. During a mapping exercise, the EDA focused their discussions on expanding residential opportunities downtown through incentives and city expansion to the south.

Events and Self-Guided Meetings

Zion Karen Baptist Church

City staff attended a service at the Zion Karen Baptist Church, 335 W. Clark St., and visited with members afterward on June 26, 2022, about their housing, transportation, and service needs. Church members placed dots on a city map to show where they live. While initially tending to reside in trailer parks and lower-income neighborhoods, Karen families are now living throughout most of Albert Lea and are investing in home ownership. This distribution indicates a need for services throughout the community, including translation of signs and outreach materials, recreational programming that is culturally appropriate, and more efforts to include these recent immigrants in community events.

As Albert Lea continues to improve its signage and wayfinding, a community approach is needed to be inclusive of different populations and ages.

No families indicated that they live in the neighborhoods where homes have the highest market values, such as Shoreland Heights, perhaps indicating that more affluent neighborhoods are out of reach for these recent immigrants. This absence may indicate a need for higher education and higher-paying occupations for this population. Karen families expressed a need for more transportation options, with many of them needing to find rides to shop for groceries and run other errands. Some of them lack knowledge of city services, such as library programming and park activities, along with information on licenses for fishing and driving, and nuisance laws such as grass height and pet waste. More outreach is needed as the city begins to implement this Comprehensive Plan.



Cinco de Mayo

City staff set up a booth to engage with children and their parents at the Cinco de Mayo celebration on May 5, 2022, in the North Broadway parking lot. City staff visited with dozens of families about their favorite places in Albert Lea and their ideas for additional amenities.

The Aquatic Center, splash pad, local parks, downtown, and the Albert Lea Public Library were top favorites. Neighborhood parks have played a positive and important role in creating a sense of community and belonging. For additional amenities, families listed an indoor playground, indoor activities during cold-weather months, grocery stores and other retailers, and more water features at the Aquatic Center.

Comments indicate that it's important for the city to maintain its park system, including neighborhood parks, supervised activities at parks during the summer, and year-round activities at parks including skating rinks in the winter. To maintain the community's high quality of life, the city needs to maintain its recreational amenities such as the City Arena, services like the library, and existing retail base while striving to improve and expand them.



Trailside Apartments

City staff visited with residents at Trailside Apartments at 204 East Front St., on Oct. 5, 2022. All the residents said they enjoy living at Trailside, noting that they may have pets, their neighbors are friendly, and they like being able to walk to Frank Hall Park and the Blazing Trail to enjoy the lake views. The conversations identified the following issues and potential solutions:

- Transportation is a major obstacle for these residents. Most do not have their own vehicle and must depend on family and friends or the SMART bus for rides to essential services, including grocery stores and medical clinics. One caregiver said it's expensive for her to ride the bus with her clients because she has to pay the fee as well as the clients. Potential solutions include no fee or reduced fee for caregivers accompanying clients, especially if the clients are elderly and use a wheelchair.
- Additional sidewalks in the area would make walking safer and offer connections to more amenities.
- Affordable housing for low-income people is another major issue. It's difficult to find safe and affordable rental housing in Albert Lea. One solution is to work with landlords to increase their willingness to accept housing vouchers. Another is to continue efforts to remove blight and hazardous structures, ensuring all rental housing meets building codes.
- Many residents expressed a need for more accessible health care.
- Many also expressed an interest in a grocery store on the south side of Albert Lea. These residents all need to find a ride to get groceries, whether at Kwik Trip, Hy-Vee, or Wal-Mart.
- For the most part, residents feel safe walking in the neighborhood around Trailside Apartments, but they did express concerns about houses where drug activity is suspected. A potential solution is an increased presence by Albert Lea Police, such as patrolling or walking the neighborhood around Trailside and perhaps regular visits to the apartment complex to talk with residents and listen to their concerns.

The residents indicated the city should incorporate Trailside and similar apartment complexes into its engagement and communication efforts, including mailing seasonal Fun Guides to residents, sending post-cards or flyers with information on how to follow city accounts on social media, conducting pop-up recreation or library events, and conducting annual visits or open houses.



PREVIOUS STUDIES

This comprehensive plan is a continuation of decades of planning efforts by the City of Albert Lea. In addition to the information gathered through community engagement, the plan draws upon previous work completed by the city. These documents include:

- City of Albert Lea Climate Action Plan, 2021
- City of Albert Lea ADA Transition Plan, 2021
- Park and Facility Master Implementation Plan, 2008
- City of Albert Lea Capital Improvement Plan - 2020-2024
- Facility Master Plan, 2015
- Shell Rock River and Winnebago River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan, 2022
- A Rental Housing Needs Analysis for the City of Albert Lea, 2021
- Comprehensive Plan, 2014

The new comprehensive plan pulls all these efforts together, takes a comprehensive look to the future, continues the positive momentum, and ensures anticipated growth strengthens and enhances the community's character.