

WINCHESTER COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 2022

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

**Sustainability –continuing into the future without decaying or collapsing.
–meeting today’s needs without sacrificing the future.**

That is the key principle of Winchester’s future vision. This Plan charts a new path toward environmental, economic, and social sustainability. It promotes a walkable community made up of vibrant mixed-use neighborhoods that honor Winchester’s rich history and use the latest technology. This Plan reflects City Council’s philosophy of proactively improving citizens’ quality of life. It is a strategy to make vision into reality –to make Winchester a Community of Choice.

PLAN HIGHLIGHTS

Making this Plan involved a new and highly public approach. Early in the process, elected officials and city staff undertook a careful and comprehensive analysis of community conditions. Citizens helped develop citywide goals and objectives, as well as specific neighborhoods’ issues. The focus of this strategic planning document shifts from a citywide perspective to look at the city as a series of neighborhoods organized within ten Planning Areas.

Using the framework of the ten Planning Areas, the Plan states specific objectives and actions to improve the City. Alternative Development Concepts illustrate a future vision of the City consistent with New Urbanism: higher densities and walkable community. It maintains stable single-family residential neighborhoods but, advocates for either infill or redevelopment embracing a mixed-use approach to land use and zoning. This Traditional Neighborhood Design is consistent with Winchester’s heritage and may also bring new vigor and prosperity to its communities.

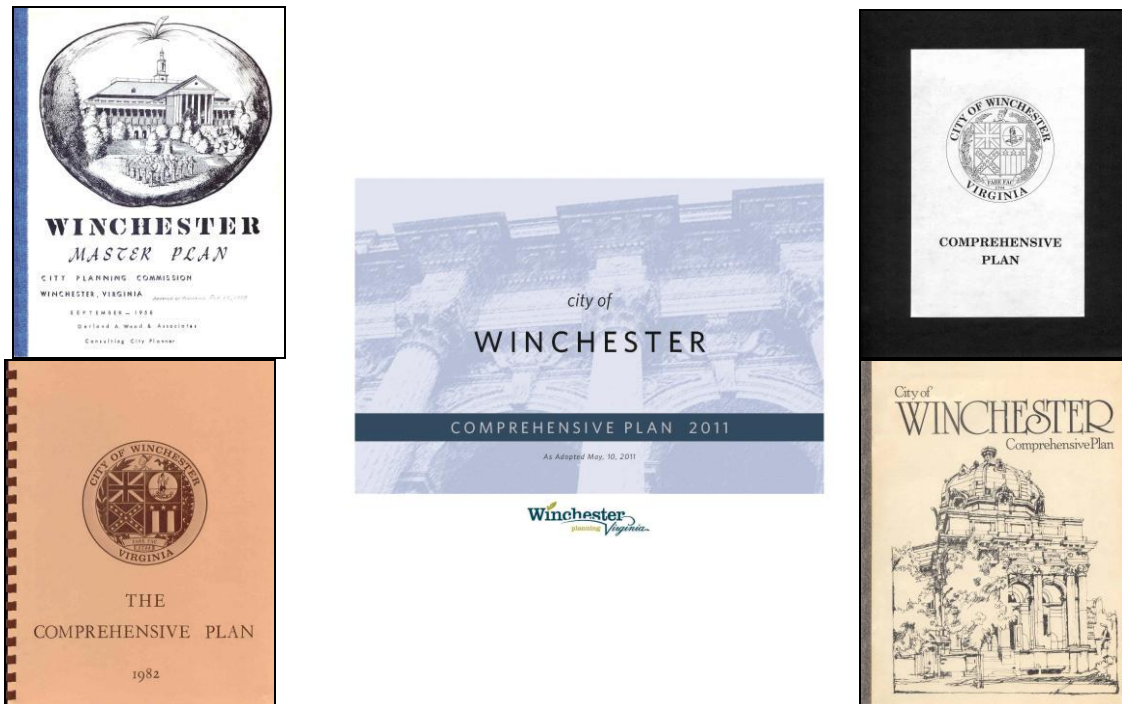
PLANNING HISTORY

This is an extensive update of Winchester’s fifth major comprehensive plan, finished in 2011. In the mid-1700s Colonel James Wood and Lord Thomas Fairfax drafted the original master plan layout of the old grid street town. Winchester officially became a city in 1874 and grew in a largely organic way. The City grew geographically by way of annexations of Frederick County land in 1905 and 1921 resulting in an area of 2.35 square miles by 1921.

In 1958, the Common Council adopted the first modern Comprehensive Plan. At that time, Winchester was much smaller geographically and population-wise than it is today and only partly subject to a zoning ordinance and zoning map. Interstate 81 was just a set of blueprints.

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The City Council adopted the second comprehensive plan in 1974. It followed the city's completion of the Loudoun Street Pedestrian Mall and its near tripling in size through annexation of 5.8 square miles in early 1971 that brought the City to its current size of 9.3 square miles. The Division of State Planning and Community Affairs prepared the 1974 plan. It was a detailed document covering all aspects of city development, including analyses of physical conditions, land use, transportation, and community facilities.



Covers of the 1958, 1974, 1982, 1991, and 2011 Comprehensive Plans.

In 1982, a third comprehensive plan was adopted. It responded to the shift of department stores from Old Town to the then newly constructed Apple Blossom Mall, and only supplemented the earlier version, noting changed conditions and new approaches to old problems. Winchester was generally seeking the status quo, and the 1982 Plan lacked a chapter on implementation.

The fourth comprehensive plan, adopted in 1991, echoed the 1982 and 1974 efforts. It reflected the concerns about development pressures from the Washington metropolitan area on Winchester and Frederick County. The 1991 Plan resulted in extensive City-sponsored rezonings as it continued to grow in a suburban way.

In 1999 and 2005, the Comprehensive Plan was updated in parts. The 1999 Plan rewrote the transportation and future land use chapters and examined the inconsistencies between the existing zoning map and the future land use map. Again, the City undertook rezonings. Many of the changes were aimed at further reducing renter-occupied

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apartment and townhouse development and increasing suburban style ownership of single-family homes.

The 2005 Plan update primarily focused on a changed vision for the Meadow Branch Avenue corridor south of the hospital. It was the first Plan to advocate New Urbanist principles outside of the historic downtown area and resulted in a significantly different zoning pattern that permitted higher densities and mixing of land uses in an area previously zoned for low density, single-family residential use only.

By 2009, the City recognized the need for a whole new format for the Comprehensive Plan, one that emphasized sustainability and better integrated economic development initiatives with planning and zoning goals and objectives. The resulting 2011 Comprehensive Plan included chapters on two types of sustainability - economic and environmental. It also addressed social equity as a third form of sustainability. The Transportation chapter was retitled the Mobility chapter to deemphasize road building and instead focus more on alternative modes of transportation including walking and cycling.

Perhaps the two biggest changes included in the 2011 Comprehensive Plan were the inclusion of redevelopment scenarios for each of ten geographic planning areas in Chapter 11 and the replacement of a traditional Future Land Use Map with a Character Map to reflect the growing interest in mixed use development and a greater focus on identifying areas of the City where change is advocated as compared with other areas where the existing character of development should be preserved.

The 2011 Plan was recognized by the Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association in 2013 as the Outstanding Comprehensive Plan for a Small City. The judges felt that the innovative format provided an excellent means for conveying the future vision of the City.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE PLAN

The Code of Virginia guides how Comprehensive Plans are to be prepared and adopted and what must be included. It specifically lays out the purpose of the Plan and who is responsible for preparing and adopting it. Appendix 1 provides further detail on the Virginia Code provisions for Comprehensive Plans.

The Plan must be made with the express purpose of “guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted and harmonious development of the territory which will, in accordance with present and probable future needs and resources, best promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants, including the elderly and persons with disabilities.”

Even though Winchester is completely included within the Winchester-Frederick County Metropolitan Planning Organization (Win-Fred MPO), the City must still develop a

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mobility plan that designates a system of infrastructure needs and recommendations. The Plan includes mobility options that support the recommended form of development: roadways, bike and pedestrian trails, sidewalks, railways, bridges, and public transportation facilities. The plan acknowledges a hierarchy of roads such as expressways, arterials, and collectors.

This Plan is a guide for a desired future vision, not an ordinance or code such as the City Zoning Ordinance. It outlines what should be done rather than what must be done. This update of the Plan continues to divide the City into ten Planning Areas for purposes of the careful studies and subsequent recommendations for redevelopment. It is strategic in nature and calls out specific actions that can be undertaken both short term as well as long term. The Plan is closely associated with the City's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) which spells out expenditures for reinvesting public funds in the community.

PLAN UPDATE PROCESS

To create this update of the Winchester Comprehensive Plan, citizens, elected officials, and the Planning Commission worked closely with a cross-section of City staff. There were four public input sessions held in 2019, allowing residents to provide input.

The City engaged the services of EPR, PC consulting firm to prepare updated graphics for the Redevelopment Scenarios in Chapter Eleven to update the citywide Character Map. Otherwise, the Plan update was undertaken by City Planning Department staff, including assistance from various college and high school interns, thus saving the City the expense of hiring outside consultants to rewrite the Plan.

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PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The Winchester citizenry and economic community helped shape the future vision presented here. Outreach efforts by city staff included a webpage devoted to the Comprehensive Plan on the City's website, a 2019 Citizen Survey, a Visioning Exercise, a series of initial public inputs sessions, a public feedback session, and the state-mandated public hearings before final Planning Commission's and City Council votes. Appendix 3 provides an overview of the public participation outreach efforts.

One of the first major steps in the City's Comprehensive Plan update process was to conduct four public input meetings through July and August of 2019. At the input sessions, groups of citizens conducted a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-&-Threats (SWOT) Analysis for the future of Winchester. Following the SWOT Analysis, participants joined small breakout groups to conduct mapping exercises in which they marked up base maps to identify features to preserve and others to change, add, or improve.

Some common themes and ideas emerged during the SWOT exercises at the four initial input meetings.

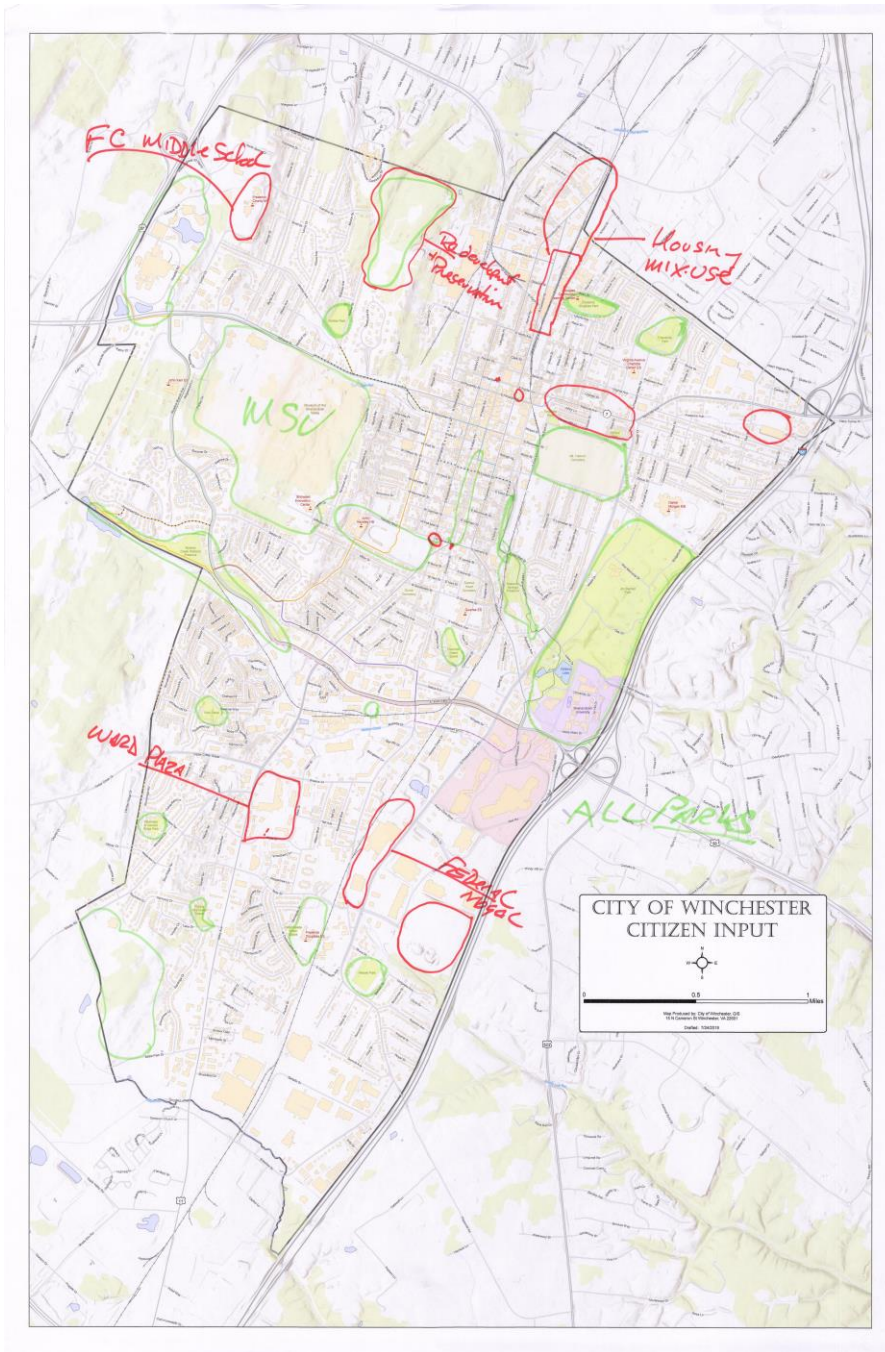
Strengths and Opportunities were:

- Diverse demographics
- Public facilities
- Shenandoah University
- Historic character & architecture
- Local government & civic engagement
- Friendly people
- Cultural opportunities & institutions
- Winchester Medical Center

Weaknesses and Threats were:

- Lack of affordable housing
- Limited transit & regional transportation
- Lack of walkability
- Lack of access to grocery stores
- Failure to address homelessness issue
- Lopsided focus on downtown
- Historic income split
- A need for diversity on City Council
- Insufficient directional information

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There was substantial general agreement among participants on many ideas, including:

- The need for revitalization and redevelopment of various key sites, especially Ward's plaza, and other older, underused commercial and industrial sites
- The need for continued efforts at historic preservation and rehabilitation, especially in the downtown area, including new uses, mixed uses, and somewhat greater intensification
- The need to preserve, enhance, and expand the existing parks and trails system, including completing the Green Circle Trail
- The need for infrastructure upgrades, especially key street connections and sidewalks, including completing the connection of Meadow Branch Avenue.

There also seemed to be a broadly felt, generally positive view toward growth and revitalization within the City, including the New Urbanist principles of mixed-use, connectivity, and human-scale, pedestrian-friendly development. There was also a generally positive view toward the trend of diversity in population and housing. There also appeared to be broadly shared concerns about the impact of rising fuel costs, the impact of growth in the County that could compete or conflict with the City's efforts to attract jobs, the recognition of the need for higher educational levels in the local labor force, and the need to find a competitive niche for commercial and industrial growth.

SYNTHESIS OF INPUTS

Armed with a wealth of detailed studies and surveys, as well as the extensive citizen input from formal and informal public outreach, the City Planning Commission then worked closely with City staff to refine citywide goals and objectives, stated in Chapter 3.

The Planning Commission dedicated time during many work sessions and meetings to discussing what would go into this update. Chapter 11 focuses on sustainable growth in each of the ten Planning Areas, noting critical properties with scenarios for how they might change.

Citizens gave good input as to where change should occur and where neighborhoods should stay the same. Planning for the City's future is less about controlling future land uses and more about achieving a shared vision for neighborhood revitalization and economic development citywide. The Character Map and Conceptual Redevelopment Plan will help the City guide and promote the kind of change and vitality called for in its future vision. They may also enhance individual property rights. These maps show the broad character of each neighborhood, as well as specific ideas for redevelopment on key sites. They are the cornerstone of the City's new vision for the future. The Character Map and Conceptual Redevelopment Plan are described in further detail in Chapter 9.

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PUBLIC ENDORSEMENT

Unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on this Comprehensive Plan's composing, review, and approval process. Public endorsement of the Comprehensive Plan was either delayed considerably or moved online. As is standard, staff posted early drafts of the Comprehensive Plan to the City's website for public viewing. The Planning Commission was able to hold an open house and public hearing on August 31, 2021. After considering revisions subsequent to the public hearing, the Comprehensive Plan was approved by the Planning Commission at its October 19, 2021 regular meeting and the Commission certified a copy of the Plan to City Council at its November 16, 2021 regular meeting. It was then forwarded to the Planning & Economic Development Committee where it was reviewed at committee for several months and forwarded to Council on January 27, 2022. City Council conducted an open house and public hearing on March 1, 2022. The Plan was officially approved by City Council on March 8, 2022.