

# I. Introduction

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## A. Overview

Almost seven years have passed since the adoption of the City of Northfield’s 2001 Comprehensive Plan. This recent effort to update the Comprehensive Plan was led by the Northfield Planning Commission, who worked closely with the national consulting firm ACP–Visioning and Planning, Ltd. to facilitate the 22-month process. The process was unique because it incorporated an assessment of the City’s development regulations to assure consistency with Plan principles. This approach afforded a stronger and more consistent relationship between the Plan and the City’s codes. This assessment will result in the creation of a hybrid form-based code as a means of accomplishing some or all of the land use objectives of this Plan.

This Plan was based on significant public input throughout the process. This input was integrated with research of the existing conditions and anticipated trends for the future. It was the charge of the Planning Commission to understand the findings—from both sources—and deliberate on appropriate recommendations for the future. This Plan represents their best effort to do so, while balancing competing interests and complex and intertwined issues.

## B. What Is a Comprehensive Plan?

A Comprehensive Plan is a community’s “blueprint” for the future. As such, it is the broadest policy document a community can have to guide decision-making on long-term physical development. Comprised of policies consisting of goals, objectives and strategies, the Comprehensive Plan guides the physical, social, and economic development of the municipality and its environs, including airspace and subsurface areas. This includes both private and public development. Local governments have been given the authority to adopt a Plan according to Minnesota State Statute 462.353, Subd. 1. This Comprehensive Plan represents Northfield’s recommendations for the future growth and development of the city.

## C. History of Comprehensive Planning in Northfield

The City has had a Comprehensive Plan in effect since at least 1966. The following summarizes the direction provided by past comprehensive planning efforts.

### 1966 Comprehensive Plan

Due to the growth of St. Olaf and Carleton Colleges, the 1966 Plan viewed Northfield as an emerging educational community. A growing role as a retirement center was also envisioned. Although agriculture was still a significant part of the economy, its role was diminishing even then.

In 1959, Hwy 3 was rerouted west of the Cannon River. This reroute eased congestion in the downtown area, but created an adverse effect on traffic movements west of the river, as noted in the 1966 Plan.

In the 1966 Plan, auto-oriented strip commercial development along Hwy 3 was noted as undesirable.

According to the 1966 Plan, adding 950 new housing units between 1966 and 1985 would be sufficient to meet a projected population of 8,250 (without college students).

The other key focus of the 1966 Comprehensive Plan was the “Central Area Plan,” which essentially includes downtown Northfield. Key problems identified were associated with traffic and parking.

### 1977 Comprehensive Plan

This Plan projected a population of 19,050 by 2000, and the addition of 2,090 new households between 1977 and 2000. According to this Plan, Northfield would absorb 381 acres to accommodate new housing.

In the 1977 Plan, industrial growth was designated in three places: within the existing industrial area along Armstrong Boulevard; on the north end of Hwy 3 adjacent to the railroad; and along the south end of Hwy 3 between the Cannon River and the Highway.

In the land use plan adopted in 1977, Northfield was to grow in a staged and orderly fashion, with residential development in the northern and southern portions of the community.

### 1988 Comprehensive Plan

The 1988 Plan, with assistance from the Rice County Planning Agency, identified an Urban Expansion Boundary. This boundary was established in order for the County to direct urban growth towards those municipalities able to adequately provide urban services.

The land use plan preserved environmental areas and concentrated retail and service commercial in the Central Business District; highway-oriented businesses along Hwy 3; industrial expansion to the west; residential expansions to the south, southeast, and northwest.

### 2001 Comprehensive Plan

In the 2001 Plan, the downtown was seen as the center and focus of social, commercial and community life to help maintain a historic small town character and atmosphere. This was a result of pressures to develop residentially and commercially on the edges of Northfield.

Key transportation goals of the Plan were to construct another river crossing between Dundas and the 5th Street Bridge, extend Jefferson Parkway through the southeast area of the city, and extend Thye Parkway between Cedar Avenue and Hwy 3 North.

Environmental initiatives in the Plan included emphasizing the Cannon River as an important element of the community’s environment, and preserving natural resources, such as Rice Creek (also known as Spring Brook), to maintain a sense of place and clear community identity.

### 2008 Comprehensive Plan

The most recent planning initiative emphasizes refining and clarifying the goals and objectives of the 2001 Plan, including protecting Northfield’s community identity and unique sense of place.

The following plans were consulted, and some are referenced, in the 2008 Comprehensive Plan:

- Greater Northfield Area Greenway System Action Plan (2007)
- Surface Water Management Plan (2007)
- Downtown Northfield Streetscape Framework Plan (2006)
- Comprehensive Economic Development Plan (2006)
- Comprehensive Sanitary Sewer Plan (2006)
- Comprehensive Water Plan (2006)
- Northfield Housing Study (2006)
- ArtsPlan06 (2006)
- Natural Resources Inventory (2005)
- Draft Northfield Parks, Open Space, and Trail System Master Plan (2008)

These technical plans are usually updated every seven to ten years. In the event there is a conflict between the 2008 Comprehensive Plan and the technical plans, the more specific document will guide.

## D. Process Highlights

The planning process was designed to achieve broadly based, informed, and thoughtful consideration of the crucial issues confronting Northfield. It built upon

past planning efforts, provided new technical information, and created multiple opportunities for public input. A timeline of major activities can be found in Table 1.1, below.

**TABLE 1.1**

Activity (*Public involvement)	Timeframe
Kick-Off	Winter 2007
Community Choices*	Spring 2007
Land Use Principles*	Spring 2007
City Council - Principles	Summer 2007
Develop Draft Master Plan	Summer/Fall 2007
Open House*	Fall 2007
Joint Planning Commission/City Council	Summer 2008
Open House*	Fall 2008
Public Hearing – Planning Commission	Fall 2008
City Council Adoption	Fall 2008

Source: ACP—Visioning & Planning, Ltd.

As designed, the Comprehensive Plan document:

- 1) records the future desired by a majority of the participating community residents;
- 2) spells out priorities and actions backed by local agreement; and,
- 3) identifies public decision-making procedures through which future disagreements over priorities and actions can be resolved in a timely and responsible fashion.

### Community Participation in the Planning Process

The planning process engaged residents in a productive dialogue on issues and values. A Community Outreach Task Force was formed to involve residents and businesses to strive for geographic diversity as well as ethnic, gender, age, and social diversity among the participants. The intuitive input gathered by the public was then integrated with technical research in order to determine community values and goals and to identify patterns of development that are consistent with these goals. This section describes the major public involvement activities:

- Community Choices
- Land Use Principles
- Open House Events
- Board and Commission Input

### Community Choices

Community Choices was an open, public, community-wide event held in April of 2007, at the Armory in downtown Northfield. There was excellent participation, with approximately 250 citizens attending. Additional stakeholder meetings were held prior to the Community Choices event.

Participants were asked to identify which places they treasure, where and how Northfield should grow, and strong places/weak places in the community. From the input gathered, a set of 12-land use principles were developed. These principles are a foundation for the Comprehensive Plan chapters.

### Land Use Principles

A second public meeting was held on May 15, 2007, at the Armory with approximately 80 people attending to receive input on the 12 land use principles identified during the Community Choices event. The Planning Commission reviewed the public comments and refined the principles.

### Open House Events

An Open House was held on September 18, 2007, at the Armory with approximately 80 people attending to present goals, objectives, and strategies for each chapter of the updated Comprehensive Plan and receive comments. The public's comments were reviewed by the Planning Commission and incorporated into the draft Comprehensive Plan document. Another Open House was held on September 23, 2008, at the Amory, prior to the Planning Commission public hearing, to present the final draft of the Plan.

### Board and Commission Input

Relevant boards and commissions were asked for input on the Comprehensive Plan, and they provided extensive comments throughout the planning process.

## E. Organization and Intent of the Plan

The 2008 Plan is organized into the following structure:

**Chapter 2: Demographic Composition** – describes general population characteristics including age, race, ethnicity, income, education, households, and employment characteristics and projects future population.

**Chapter 3: Community Identity** – addresses the community’s identity, including the physical environment and activities, events, and institutions that produce Northfield’s identity. It provides guidance for the preservation and enhancement of this identity.

**Chapter 4: Land Use** – identifies issues related to growth and land use, analyzes the current land use pattern and recommends a set of development principles and a conceptual land use plan illustrating the form, pattern, and character of future development and redevelopment.

**Chapter 5: Environmental Resources** – identifies the community’s unique environmental resources including bedrock, soils, groundwater, and watersheds, and describes current protection efforts. It also establishes objectives and strategies for the preservation, protection and enhancement of the natural environment.

**Chapter 6: Sewer and Water Resources** – establishes key policies and programs for the timely, fiscally responsible, and environmentally conscious extension and management of the City’s potable water, sanitary sewer, and surface water infrastructure systems.

**Chapter 7: Transportation** – evaluates current and future transportation needs based on the 2008 Comprehensive Transportation Plan Update that was adopted by the City Council following completion of this Plan.

**Chapter 8: Parks and Recreation** – summarizes the draft Northfield Parks, Open Space, and Trail System Plan, which describes the existing park and trail system in the city, and goals for extending that system in the future.

**Chapter 9: Community Facilities** – looks at the location and capacity of City offices, public safety facilities, schools, health care and other public facilities and recommends planning for facility upgrade or replacement and their sensitive location within neighborhoods.

**Chapter 10: Economic Development** – summarizes the results of the Comprehensive Economic Development Plan, adopted by the Economic Development Authority (EDA) in 2006 and recommends

a set of three priority strategies plus several additional objectives and strategies for the City and EDA to implement.

**Chapter 11: Housing** – provides a brief summary of existing housing conditions and an analysis of supply and demand, as well as an assessment of demographics, rental housing inventory, and single-family housing stock. Specific attention is paid to the need for housing that is affordable to existing residents and workers.

**Chapter 12: Implementation** – provides guidance for maintaining accountability, monitoring activities, creating appropriate development regulations and procedures, and involving the community in implementation of the 2008 Plan.

**Appendices** – The following supporting documents were prepared as part of the comprehensive planning process and are included in the Appendices:

**Appendix A – Built Environment.** This appendix is a report presented to the Planning Commission on April 2, 2007. It details existing land use conditions in Northfield as of that date, and lays the foundation for Chapter 4, Land Use.

**Appendix B - Transportation.** This appendix is the traffic counts from the 2008 Comprehensive Transportation Plan Update.

This Comprehensive Plan is intended to serve as a general guide for Northfield for the next 20 years. The document should be read and interpreted as a whole to fully understand the direction city leaders should take. The Plan is not intended to be taken piecemeal, nor are words or phrases to be taken out of context. The goals, objectives and strategies described in this Plan should also be applied with regard to the specific circumstances of a situation, taking into account other City documents (such as the technical plans referenced earlier).

## E. Key Directions for the Community

The following points summarize the key directions that the community should take in order to realize the vision inherent in this Plan. These points are drawn from public sentiment expressed throughout the planning process, an analysis of the Plan’s objectives and strategies, as well as deliberations with the Planning

Commission. Although the Comprehensive Plan consists of distinctive elements, these key directions represent an integrated approach to achieving the community's vision for its future.

### **Preserving the area's natural, historic, and cultural resources.**

The most significant theme that surfaced throughout the planning process is the need to protect the city's significant natural resources, including wildlife habitats, farmland, recreational lands, scenic vistas, and environmentally significant areas. Conservation of land will require trade-offs in other areas. For example, in order to deal with rising land prices that can result from reducing the supply of buildable land, higher density development should be allowed and strategies need to be developed to direct more growth to the appropriate areas, particularly within the existing community. Historic buildings should be adaptively reused to accommodate new functions and activities without sacrificing the historic integrity of individual structures. Historic Resources, including sites and other areas of significance, will be preserved by the City. This Plan effectively captures these trade-offs, striking a balance between land preservation and the need for intensified development in the community.

### **Assuring a strong economy.**

From an economic standpoint, Northfield would be well-served by the diversification and expansion of its economic base. This will generate fiscal benefits for the community, create more private sector job opportunities for residents and somewhat reduce reliance on the Colleges as the economic drivers of the community. Finally, the diversification of community services and facilities, including recreation facilities, social services and transportation opportunities, will help to ensure that all residents have access to a high quality of life.

### **Encouraging vibrancy in the downtown core and its fringe areas.**

Downtown must be allowed to grow and change to allow existing uses to expand and new uses to be established. This will maintain its economic and cultural standing while retaining its historic character and walkable scale. Vibrancy in this area can be pursued through a variety of initiatives, including additional housing development, economic investment, expansion of arts and cultural facilities, promotion of a mix of uses,

and improvements to the public realm (such as parks, public art, streetscapes, and public squares). These initiatives will lead to a more walkable community and allow for more day-to-day interactions among residents. Such vibrancy will also attract more visitors to the community, and enhance the tourism industry.

### **Maintaining the community's character.**

The preservation of Northfield's community character encompasses a variety of different approaches, including protecting historic resources (historic neighborhoods, downtown, and other sites) and promoting adaptive reuse of historic buildings, to creating neighborhood design standards that will ensure new development is in accord with existing character, to protecting farmland and promoting the local agricultural economy. Residents have a strong interest in maintaining the charm of their community for years to come, and appropriate regulatory tools (such as form-based codes and conservation easements) will help to ensure that this goal is achieved.

### **Enhancing "Town/Gown" relations.**

A symbiotic relationship exists between the City and its educational institutions. The Colleges generate a great deal of employment and provide economic support to local businesses; they also enhance the cultural opportunities available to residents. On the other hand, the City provides a variety of public facilities and services to help support the large student population, while having relatively limited opportunities for fiscally supporting such services through local taxation. A central theme throughout this Plan is the need to enhance relations between the City and the Colleges in order to maximize the benefits available to the entire community in a manner that is fair and financially viable for each entity.

### **Promoting an ethic of sustainability in all city activities.**

The community has a high degree of awareness regarding environmental issues. Initiatives recommended throughout this Plan detail ways to protect natural resources, conserve energy, reduce reliance on the private automobile, promote healthier lifestyles and encourage green building techniques. Public education will be a key component in supporting this ethic of sustainability. Efforts to promote greater sustainability in City policies and practices can set the tone for the

community and serve as an example for private sector businesses, including the development community.

These key directions resound throughout each of the Plan's elements. Taken together, they represent a simplified, yet cohesive approach for enhancing the city in a manner that is aligned with Northfield's community values.

### **Plan for strategic growth in the community.**

In public meetings held in 2007, community members expressed a strong interest in infill and redevelopment within city limits before annexing new land into the city. Also, there is a strong desire to have a balance of residential, commercial, and industrial development. This will lead to adequate and affordable housing, jobs that provide a living wage and a sufficient tax base to meet the community's needs. Therefore, City leaders should strategically plan for how growth will occur, and not simply react to proposed development projects.

## **G. Policy Foundation for the Plan**

The policy foundation of the Plan was shaped by an extensive community involvement and planning process. The Vision Statement for the community, noted below, was developed by the Planning Commission based on this public involvement. Also, the Comprehensive Plan has three key layers of policies: goals, objectives and strategies. Goals are the broadest policy statements that state a desired outcome in general terms. Objectives indicate a more specific policy direction and help organize strategies. Strategies are detailed actions necessary to initiate or complete an objective – such as a project, program or policy. There are multiple objectives for each goal and multiple strategies for each objective.

### **Vision Statement**

Northfield values its unique heritage as a mill and college town, and will reflect its community identity by preserving its historic and environmental character, and enhancing its quality of place through a progressive and sustainable development pattern.

### **Goals, Objectives and Strategies**

This Plan includes ten goals, 53 objectives, and 279 strategies, which are described in detail in the following chapters and summarized in Chapter 12: Implementation. The goals are listed below.

**Community Identity:** Decisions influencing Northfield's future land development will reflect the city's history and natural and built environments, and enhance social capital.

**Land Use:** An efficient use of land resources that emphasizes strategic development and redevelopment, preserved natural areas and agricultural resources, a strong and vibrant downtown, and promotes sustainable planning practice.

**Environmental Resources:** The natural environment will be protected, enhanced and better integrated into the community.

**Sewer and Water Resources:** Provide potable water, wastewater collection and treatment, and surface water control to the community in an environmentally sensitive, financially-equitable and fiscally-responsible manner.

**Transportation:** Facilitate the movement of people, goods, and services within and through the city on a safe, convenient, coordinated, and fiscally responsible network of routes using a variety of transportation modes.

**Parks and Recreation:** Promote a high quality of life in Northfield by providing a balanced and sustainable system of parks, natural open spaces, athletic facilities and trails consistent with the historic sense of place in the community.

**Community Facilities:** Plan for and prioritize the construction of community facilities so as to provide the greatest benefit to the residents in the most cost-effective manner possible, with the most positive effect on the immediate surroundings.

**Economic Development:** Promote economic development by supporting existing businesses, by talent attraction and retention, by aggressive business recruitment, and by increasing the availability of commercial and industrial land. A further goal is to reposition Northfield to become more competitive in its economic development initiatives in relation to the Twin Cities, the Rochester corridor, and its neighboring communities.

**Housing:** Provide affordable housing opportunities for all the people who live and work in Northfield. A variety of housing options, including rental housing, should be available as first-time homebuyers have families, become empty-nesters, become elderly and eventually need assisted living services. The historic neighborhoods that contribute to Northfield's sense of place and character will be protected. Green technology, environmental considerations, and strong neighborhood qualities should be combined to provide a safe, secure and pleasing living environment.

### Principles

Land use principles are statements of intent that describe the direction of future development and redevelopment in the community. These principles will help guide the City on how to use its limited land resources efficiently and effectively to continue to foster a high quality physical environment. (See Chapter 4 for a more detailed description of the principles.)

The principles reflect a variety of land use topics and themes. They focus on the quality, pattern, character and organization of development. They specifically address mobility and connectivity as it relates to neighborhoods, districts and corridors. It should be understood that the City could take action that induces or inhibits, maintains or changes, future development patterns.

The City's land use principles are:

1. The small town character will be enhanced.
2. The natural environment will be protected, enhanced and better integrated into the community.
3. The preference for accommodating future growth is in infill locations, then redevelopment/land intensification opportunities, and then on the edge of existing developed areas.
4. New and redeveloped residential communities (areas) will have strong neighborhood qualities.
5. Environmentally-sensitive and sustainable practices will be integrated into new developments and redeveloped areas.
6. Places with a mix of uses that are distinctive and contribute to increasing the city's overall vitality are preferred.
7. Neighborhood-serving commercial will be small scale and integrated with the residential context.
8. A wider range of housing choices will be encouraged – in the community as well as in neighborhoods.
9. Rural character of certain areas of the community will be protected.
10. Streets will create an attractive public realm and be exceptional places for people.
11. Places will be better connected, in part to improve the function of the street network and also to better serve neighborhoods.
12. Opportunities will be created to walk and bike throughout the community.