



# Chapter I

## Introduction

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## Purpose & Need

In the late 2000s, the City of Elkhart experienced some devastating and challenging economic set-backs that garnered national attention from the media and the White House. Elkhart was highlighted as a case study in the nation's economic recession in 2009, with its nearly 19 percent unemployment rate (March 2009) and the downturn of the recreational vehicle (RV) industry. As the national unemployment rate continued to increase throughout 2009, Elkhart's unemployment rate started to decrease and the RV industry began to experience a slight improvement throughout the year.

In early 2009, the City of Elkhart's Planning & Development Department initiated a process to update its 1996 *Comprehensive Land Use Plan* and revise the planning and development direction for the City. The timing of this planning process uses the current economic "down time" to the City's advantage to establish a framework for planning and development activity that is representative of the City's vision for the future and value system. As Elkhart, the State of Indiana, and the nation continue to recover and re-adjust to the new economic normal, through its *Comprehensive Plan Update*, the City is preparing itself for new opportunities and investment over the next 20 years.

## Study Area

Located in north central Indiana, Elkhart is part of the Elkhart-Goshen Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) as well as the South Bend-Elkhart-Mishawaka Combined Statistical Area, also known as Michiana. Approximately 32 square miles in area, the City of Elkhart is located in the northwest corner of Elkhart County. The City is located within portions of Concord, Osolo, Baugo, and Cleveland townships and is adjacent to the Michigan state line.

This *Comprehensive Plan Update* builds on and revises the City of Elkhart's 1996 *Comprehensive Land Use Plan*. Unlike the 1996 *Plan*, this *Plan Update* only includes the 23.45 square miles of the City of Elkhart corporate boundaries. The previous *Plan* included the corporate boundaries along with Baugo, Cleveland, Osolo, Concord, and a portion of Washington townships.

## How to Use This Plan

A comprehensive plan is a document with a long-range view that serves as a guide for making land use decisions, preparing capital improvement programs, and determining the rate, timing, and location of future growth. It is based on establishing long-term vision, goals, and objectives that direct investment and development activity within a city. A comprehensive plan typically considers a 20-year planning horizon, although plan updates can

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occur before the expiration date if the recommendations are implemented, goals are achieved, community conditions change, values and/or priorities shift, or if circumstances dictate that the plan is no longer germane. As such, a comprehensive plan should be reviewed annually to determine progress and relevancy.

The development of the City of Elkhart's *Comprehensive Plan Update* is the result of a multi-year, three phased process. The phased planning approach is organized around three activities:

Phase 1 – Visioning (2009)

Phase 2 – Guiding Principles & Physical Planning (2010)

Phase 3 – Implementing (2011)

This plan addresses four primary planning themes: 1) land use, 2) transportation, 3) environment and design, and 4) economic development. These themes are incorporated into the requirements for comprehensive plans specified by Indiana Code 36-7-4-502:

Sec. 502.A comprehensive plan must contain at least the following elements:

1. A statement of objectives for the future development of the City of Elkhart.
2. A statement of policy for the land use development of the City of Elkhart.
3. A statement of policy for the development of public ways, public places, public lands, public structures, and public utilities.

Once adopted, this *Comprehensive Plan Update* will:

- Update existing land use inventories
- Address key land use, transportation, urban design, and other development issues
- Provide guidance for future land use and infrastructure decisions
- Outline policy to direct future growth, development, and reinvestment

The Comprehensive Plan will be used by the City of Elkhart Plan Commission and City Council as required under Indiana Law. This plan serves as the basis for development and infrastructure policy related to development, redevelopment and management of land uses. This plan should provide the policy basis to support any

changes in the Zoning and Subdivision Control Ordinance as well as provide guidance on the creation of a Capital Improvements Plan.

### Change in Land Use/Re-Zoning Review

From a policy standpoint, the plan will provide guidance specifically for changes in land use through rezonings or future land use amendments. The City Council and Plan Commission should give consideration to the relevant section of the plan when reviewing applications and desired changes. Specifically this review would determine whether a rezone or land use amendment is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, appropriate recommendations in the Plan and Future Land Use Map. If the application is supported by the various relevant sections of the Plan, then the rezoning/ amendment should be approved. If the application is not supported by the various relevant sections of the Plan, then the Council and Commission should either deny the application or approve the application with conditions that would make it consistent with the intent of the Plan. A situation could occur where changes have occurred either socially, physically, culturally or economically in Elkhart that make the Comprehensive Plan inconsistent with the values and goals of the City. At that point, the Commission or Council should note that and the comprehensive plan needs to be updated to be consistent and responsive to the changing conditions.

### Applicability of Comprehensive Plan to Other Planning Tools

The Comprehensive Plan also provides guidance for land use planning tools and development actions and decisions. The specific tools of the planning process could include zoning ordinance, subdivision control ordinance, capital improvement programs, land bank programs, redevelopment programs.

### Subdivision Control Regulations

Subdivision control regulations provide standards for the division of land and the development of many types of infrastructure within subdivisions. Standards could include the splitting of the number of tracts of land, design of streets, sidewalk and pathway locations and other physical improvements to the land. The purpose of Subdivision Control Regulations is to protect the owner from inadequate services which are needed for different types of land uses as well as limit the burden on taxpayers for having to provide additional costs for underserved or improperly designed improvements. The Elkhart Plan Commission has a process for reviewing subdivisions.

**Zoning Ordinance**

The Zoning Ordinance regulates land use and development for land within the city. It controls the size, density, and character of development within a district through the use of developmental standards. Additionally, zoning classifications are broken into permitted land uses within each district as well as conditional and special exception land uses. The Ordinance has been amended to include architectural standards for the exterior of buildings in designated overlay or historic districts. The majority of the chapters of the plan address the various design standards, community character, placement and location of development and redevelopment that would support the zoning ordinance.

**Building Code**

The Building Code regulates the condition and maintenance of all property, buildings and structures. It also provides the standards for supplied utilities to ensure structures are safe, sanitary and fit for habitation. The Plan provides specific guidance in Chapter Three regarding the appearance of the Elkhart Community.

**Minimum Housing Ordinance (Code Enforcement)**

The Housing Ordinance regulates and governs the condition and maintenance of all residential buildings and structures. Chapter Two discusses existing housing stock and housing conditions in detail. The Plan then provides specific guidance in Chapter Three and Chapter Four regarding future housing needs in the community, maintaining existing housing stock and future areas for redevelopment of additional housing.