DES MOINES’
2020
COMMUNITY CHARACTER PLAN
City of Des Moines, Iowa
Community Development Department
2020 COMMUNITY CHARACTER PLAN

Prepared by the Des Moines Plan and Zoning Commission

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SUMMARIES OF POLICIES

The following is a listing of the policies included in the 2020 Community Character Plan. Some policies have been significantly shortened in the interest of space. Please refer to the page number in parentheses after the title for more information.

Chapter 1 - UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

The goals and concepts in Chapter 1 express the basic principles that underlie decisions about land use, transportation, and development within the community. The goal is to create a livable community for several generations. The concepts build on our existing character, create a pedestrian-friendly city for residents, and encourage growth in the existing city limits and within future annexation areas.

Sustainability Goals (Page 6)
  - Protect natural resources;
  - Promote economic growth and efficiency;
  - Promote social equity and justice;
  - Enhance and preserve Des Moines' urban character;
  - Promote a citywide approach to development while establishing the neighborhood as the unit of planning.

Community Character Concepts (Page 8)
  - Des Moines' traditional neighborhoods have character worth protecting in existing neighborhoods and duplicating in newly developing areas;
  - Des Moines has a distinctive "Sense of Place" in its urban character; and
  - Historic districts and landmark structures should be preserved and protected.

Transportation Concepts (Page 10)
  - Transportation facilities should support and guide the balanced growth concept for the metropolitan area;
  - New development should be compact to promote walking and transit;
  - Traffic calming techniques that slow down traffic are important to implementing a pedestrian and child friendly city;
  - Buildings, not roads, should dominate the city;
  - Pedestrian amenities are an integral component of street improvements and design; and
  - Guidelines for new construction and reconstruction of streets should be based on abutting land use classifications.

Growth and Annexation Concepts (Page 14)
  - Develop new areas of the city as a series of interconnected neighborhoods that incorporate the values of traditional neighborhoods; and
  - Promote annexation as a way to expand the city's boundaries and capture new growth for Des Moines.

Chapter 2 - CITY FORM

The policies in Chapter 2 focus on preserving and enhancing the community character of Des Moines by capitalizing on the existing natural and urban forms of the city. Development of additional design guidelines, administered through the site plan review process, are a crucial part of implementing the policies.

Building Blocks of City Form: Nodes (page 21)
- Apply special design standards through the site plan review process to specific commercial nodes of Des Moines with aesthetic integrity, in order to preserve their design character and market edge.

Building Blocks of City Form: Districts (page 23)
  - Preserve the unique characteristics that make up Des Moines' highly inarguable neighborhoods by maintaining important scale and form relationships.
  - Develop a garage overlay policy that ensures a garage is placed on the lot consistent with the predominant character of the neighborhood. In districts in which garages are less prominent than houses, require garages to be placed in the rear yard or be recessed from the front of the house.
Building Blocks of City Form: Landmarks (page 24)
- Design special approaches on streets that lead to major landmarks.
- Establish landmark protection status for key landmark buildings in Des Moines.
- Apply special design standards through the sight plan review process for properties within the vicinity of major landmarks such as St. John’s Basilica, to ensure design compatibility.
- Preserve and reinforce existing viewing points that successfully frame the downtown skyline and Capitol Building.

Building Blocks of City Form: Edges (page 25)
- Develop standards for street and building construction to minimize any negative impacts within environmentally critical areas.
- Establish a tree-saving policy for new buildings, subdivisions, and road development.
- Establish new development patterns and regulations based on preserving the integrity of natural areas.
- Convert abandoned rail lines to landscaped multi-purpose paths, improving the image of these major edges and connections among districts.

Building Blocks of City Form: Paths (page 26)
- “Humanize” auto-strips with human scale elements.
- Promote out-parcel development in “big-box” parking lots.
- Promote shared parking in commercial areas.
- Maintain the street grid as the preferred option when evaluating new development street patterns.
- Discourage the closing of street sections, which disrupt the existing grid pattern.
- Restore the street grid whenever possible.
- Restore the direction of streets to a 2-way function.
- Ensure the planning and implementation of a comprehensive landscape plan, for I-235 and Martin Luther King Parkway.

Special Corridors (page 38)
- Preserve the character of Gateway and Design Integrity Corridors, by developing special design standards that address connections among neighborhoods, entrances into highly imaginable districts, and entrances to the downtown.

- Enhance Scenic and View Corridors and protect natural resources, by creating design standards limiting development within a “viewshed.”
- Prohibit the erection of pole signs and off-premises signs along any of the specially designated corridors in the City.
- Develop special design guidelines for the right-of-way along corridors that can be implemented through both public and private activities and will encourage continuity and visual interest.
- Promote the burial of utility lines where feasible along new streets and within street improvement projects.
- Revisit the Metropolitan tree planting standards to ensure that overstory trees, with a height at maturity that can create a strong street canopy, are recommended.
- Include street trees and sidewalks as an integral part of all street improvements.

Residential Corridor Protection: Requests for Increasing Density (page 41)
- Ensure that medium or high-density residential development along corridors is clustered and that support services are within walking distance.

Residential Corridor Protection: Requests for Rezoning from residential to commercial (page 41)
- Closely enforce rental housing inspections along corridors to ensure that housing is not allowed to deteriorate in anticipation of commercial rezoning.
- Clearly delineate the areas along corridors appropriate for commercial expansion according to standards contained in this plan.

Residential Corridor Protection: Street Improvements (page 41)
- The Plan and Zoning Commission should review all street improvements to ensure that residential protection corridors are not endangered. Guidelines for street improvements through residential areas should be developed and should include traffic calming principles and protection of public and pedestrian space.
Chapter 3 - DES MOINES' TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOODS

Des Moines pre-World War II neighborhoods are analyzed to determine what physical characteristics contribute to quality neighborhoods. Policies focus on how those characteristics can be emulated and updated to improve the living environment in new residential areas.

Development of New Residential Areas: Neotraditional Neighborhoods (page 51)

Traditional neighborhoods contain the following characteristics that should be emulated in newly developing areas. New neighborhoods will:
- Be of a "walkable" size;
- Have a definable edge and center;
- Contain a variety of uses including single and multi-family dwellings, schools, shopping, and recreation;
- Provide connections through pedestrian-friendly streets and multi-purpose paths; and
- Include special public spaces to function as gathering places.

- Develop a garage overlay policy that ensures a garage is placed on the lot consistent with the predominant character of the neighborhood. In traditional neighborhoods a garage should be placed in the rear yard or recessed from the front of the house.

Multi-Family Diverse Density (page 66)
- Use a land use classification that allows multi-family housing in older neighborhoods where the current character is over 40% duplex and over 10% multi-family structures. A future zoning classification would include compatibility standards to ensure that existing and future multi-family housing promotes investment, a variety in size and price range of housing units, and pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods.
- Use a land use classification to encourage well-designed single family and duplex housing units in older neighborhoods where fewer than 40% of the units are two family and fewer than 10% of the units are multi-family. Additional multi-family housing would not be allowed. A resulting zoning designation would include compatibility standards that ensure any density increase reinforces affordable owner occupancy, provides for adequate off-street parking and makes a positive contribution to the neighborhoods character.
- Apply a low-density land use designation and a single family zoning classification where fewer than 25% of the housing stock is duplex units or multi-family housing.

Chapter 4 - EXISTING CHARACTER OF NEIGHBORHOODS AND HOUSING

One of Des Moines' strengths is the character of its existing neighborhoods. Policies focus on preserving the character of neighborhoods through design guidelines, development standards, and rezonings. Administrative and procedural changes will be necessary implementation steps.

Single Family (page 64)

Develop a set of compatible development standards or "palettes" for infill development and additions consistent with the predominant character of the neighborhood.
Implement the compatible development standards through administrative review prior to issuing a building permit.
Insert the compatible development standards into the Board of Adjustment criteria for review of exceptions and variances.

- Multi-Family Corridor Development (page 70)
  - Encourage the rehabilitation of older and historic multi-family housing along corridors by developing unique parking solutions and encouraging near-by commercial centers.
  - Ensure that medium or high-density residential development along corridors is clustered and that support services are within walking distance.

- Multi-Family Large-Scale Residential Development (page 71)
  - Encourage the preservation of the existing large, multi-family developments through zoning codes, tax abatement for renovation, and housing inspection.
  - Encourage the development of new multi-family housing through the Planned Unit Development process to provide maximum flexibility for the developer and to achieve the highest quality design.

2020 COMMUNITY CHARACTER PLAN
• Encourage developments that incorporate both single family and multifamily housing that is well connected through streets and pedestrian paths.

Higher Density within Existing Neighborhoods (page 72)
• Consider the merit of increases in density if an existing or proposed building or development meets development and design guidelines.

Neotraditional Areas (page 73)
• Encourage the integration of both single-family and multi-family housing in new developments.
• Encourage a ratio of 25% to 35% multi-family housing to 65% to 75% single family housing in areas to be developed. The single-family housing should be at least 90% owner-occupied.

Transitions Between Commercial and Residential Property (page 74)
• Establish site-planning standards for commercial development to include the required use of “cut-off” light fixtures, which direct the light downward. Do not allow the use of floodlights.
• Establish performance landscape standards for the transition area between potentially conflicting land uses to include the following:
  - Require a minimum distance of 25’ between the dwelling unit and the active commercial area;
  - If the 25’ buffer is located only on the residential property side, require an additional 7’ of buffer area to be located on the commercial property between the residential property line and the commercial building, parking lot or loading area.
  - Require mid-story trees and understory vegetation of a certain density. The trees and vegetation may be planted on either property on a combination of both. Plantings must occur on the commercial property side if an additional 7’ of buffer area is required.
  - Require both fences and vegetation for buffers between land uses. Fences alone are insufficient to meet landscaping standards between residential and nonresidential land uses.
  - The commercial property shall establish tree plantings in the street right-of-way along their property consistent with the existing tree planting patterns along the street.

Chapter 5 - EXISTING CHARACTER OF COMMERCIAL LAND USE
Commercial areas are essential to provide jobs, tax base, and services to residents. A primary goal of the chapter is to enhance the pedestrian character of all retail and shopping areas whether it is a regional shopping center or a small neighborhood store. Implementation of these goals will focus on design standards and guidelines, implemented through the site plan review process, that will encourage compact development, human-scale building and site designs, and connections to residential areas. Policies also focus on attracting clean, well-designed industrial parks and business parks that provide jobs and are assets to neighborhoods.

Commercial Policies for Implementation (page 94)
• Define policies, development standards and design guidelines to ensure pedestrian scale, appeal, and quality environment is balanced with auto safety and convenience.
• Establish marketing strategies for the various commercial categories to attract investors, businesses, and customers to the area and to maintain healthy commercial areas.
• Incorporate additional development standards and design guidelines into the site plan review process.
• The design guidelines for those commercial buildings and sites that are designated pedestrian-oriented will address:
  - Appropriate massing and scale of the commercial building(s) as it relates to the surrounding commercial buildings and residential neighborhood;
  - Bulk regulations that allow buildings to frame the street and create a sense of enclosure for the pedestrian;
  - Placement of parking;
  - Landscaping of parking lots;
  - Creation of storefronts;
  - Use of traditional building materials;
  - Architectural techniques to visually divide the building into smaller parts; and
  - Design of storm water management facilities.
Design guidelines for buildings and sites that are designated auto-oriented will address:
- Appropriate massing and scale of the commercial building(s) as it relates to the surrounding commercial buildings and residential neighborhood;
- Establishing a relationship of the building with the street by setback, pedestrian pathways, outlot development, and streetscape;
- Creating pedestrian pathways through an individual development and among different developments;
- Placement of parking;
- Maximum and minimum numbers of parking spaces;
- Landscaping of parking areas;
- Quality, durable building materials;
- Detailing of the building to create a store front and to add pedestrian appeal and character; and
- The design of storm water management facilities.

Institutional Uses (page 95)

New construction or expansion of institutional buildings or parking areas located within residential zones should be reviewed by the Plan and Zoning and not be allowed as a matter of right. The Commission will develop guidelines to regulate the expansion according to the following:
- Materials and details of the building;
- Bulk regulations, setbacks and transitions will complement those of the neighborhood;
- Placement of parking, driveways, and provision of transitions;
- The impact of the increased traffic and use on the surrounding neighborhood; and
- Shared uses of open space and parking among the institution and residents.

Institutional expansions should result in uniform street frontages and not leave "islands" of remaining dwellings surrounded by parking areas or institutional buildings.

Industrial Uses (page 96 and 97)
- Allow for a limited amount of heavy industrial uses where appropriate, but minimize negative impacts on the surroundings. Concentrate on retaining and improving existing industrial uses to preserve existing jobs.
- Prohibit development of additional housing units in major industrial zones. Encourage the purchase of homes in industrial areas as businesses seek to expand.
- Heavy industrial uses, that operative with a negative impact on their surroundings, should be required to mitigate their impact. Negative impacts can sometimes be buffered with natural or built features to shelter surrounding areas from the most negative impacts.
- Engage in pollution clean up to be able to provide clean and competitive sites for new industrial development and protection for the community.
- Encourage a mixture of light manufacturing, office, warehousing and distribution jobs in designated Planned Industrial Parks. Ensure design, pedestrian connections, and landscaping are part of an adopted overall plan for the development.
- Encourage industrial development that provides a high density of jobs per acre.

Chapter 6 - CITY TRENDS

Chapter 6 provides background data on employment and population growth. No policies are included in this chapter.
Chapter 7 - TRANSPORTATION
Changing transportation planning to consider the impact of traffic on adjacent land uses and to make the city more pedestrian and child-friendly are key concepts of this chapter. The policies recommend physical design measures that slow traffic speed, improve safety, and consider adjacent commercial or residential properties when making road improvements.

Traffic Calming (page 104)
• Develop a set of traffic control measures that will slow traffic speeds and reduce traffic accidents that can be applied in different settings in Des Moines. These measures may include but are not limited to the following:
  - Narrowing the pavement by:
    a) Reducing roadway widths through striping lanes;
    b) Establishing parking lanes on streets;
    c) Establishing boulevard treatments and/or plantings in the tree lawn that protect the pedestrian area;
    d) Shortening the pedestrian crossing distance through construction of crosswalk bulbouts, and
    e) Establishing gateway features such as neighborhood signage.
  - Deflecting the vehicle path by:
    a) Constructing curbed or physical barriers to a straight path; and
    b) Constructing roundabouts at intersections as traffic control devises.
  - Deflecting the vertical profile by:
    a) Using textured paving at key intersections; or
    b) Installing speed humps and tables at key pedestrian intersections.
  - Sharing the pavement by:
    a) Establishing sufficient room for bicycle travel.
  - Rerouting the driver where cut-through traffic poses a problem by:
    a) Turn restrictions, one way streets, or eliminating direct routes through the neighborhood.
• Identify key locations within the city where traffic speeds threaten the pedestrian integrity of a neighborhood or commercial district and work with the residents and property owners to apply appropriate traffic calming measures.
• Consider traffic calming measures in designing new roads
• Develop a street/land use classification matrix to determine transportation improvements that will compliment types of land use.

Chapter 8 - IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES
Additional design guidelines and development standards are essential to implementation of the concepts of the 2020 Community Character Plan. Some of those guidelines can be implemented administratively through existing staff processes. Others require a more active role of the Plan and Zoning Commission in review of plans and proposed development.

Administrative Standards
• Develop a set of compatible development standards for infill residential development consistent with the character of the neighborhood. Implement the development standards through staff review prior to issuance of a building permit with appeal to the Plan and Zoning Commission.
• Develop a garage overlay policy that ensures a garage is placed on the lot consistent with the predominant character of the neighborhood. Implement the garage overlay policy by staff review prior to issuance of a building permit with appeal to the Plan and Zoning Commission.

New Zoning Ordinance
• Develop a new zoning ordinance that includes classifications for the land use categories shown on the Proposed Land Use Map. The zoning ordinance will incorporate standards for development consistent with the concepts of the 2020 Community Character Plan including but not limited to: commercial development, parking, landscaping, used car lots, salvage yards, and signage.
• Eliminate the extension of parking 100’ into a residential zone as a matter of right.
Proposed Rezonings
Rezone areas of traditional neighborhoods zoned high or medium density to a lower density with requirements that additional multi-family or duplex housing be approved by the Plan and Zoning Commission and meet compatibility design standards.

Administrative Site Plan Review
- Develop additional design guidelines for the site plan ordinance that will create desirable physical design elements for buildings and parking areas, for pedestrian access, and for connections to commercial areas. Continue site plan review as an administrative process for most development according to the standards established. Incorporate flexibility into the site plan ordinance by allowing staff to approve a relaxation of some bulk regulations if additional land scaping, building standards, or performance standards are met.

Plan and Zoning Commission’s Role in Development Review
- While the additional site plan standards recommended by the 2020 Community Character Plan should be implemented predominantly by administrative process, the Plan and Zoning Commission should retain an appeal and oversight role in the process.
- Currently all Conditional and Special Permit Uses under the Zoning Code must go before the Zoning Board of Adjustment for review and approval. All such uses should be reviewed for the most appropriate review authority and process for implementation of the 2020 Community Character Plan.
- Additional standards to insure neighborhood compatibility should be developed for:
  a) Construction of multi-family development in a commercial zone;
  b) Construction of duplex or multi-family housing in diverse density, traditional neighborhoods;
  c) Motor vehicle sales lots, including used car sales, of any size; and
  d) All churches, synagogues or other religious institutions or schools located within a residential zone.

Review of Transportation Improvements
- The Plan and Zoning Commission will review and comment on the 3-year Transportation Capital Improvement Program and the long range Highway and Street Improvement Plan for conformance with the transportation elements and principles of the 2020 Community Character Plan early in its development process and prior to submittal to the Metropolitan Planning Organization.
- The Plan and Zoning Commission will review and comment on the City’s annual Capital Improvement Program for conformance with the transportation elements and principles of the 2020 Community Character Plan early in its development process and prior to submittal to the City Council.
- The Community Development Department will be involved in developing the projects included in the annual Capital Improvements Program, the 3-year Transportation Capital Improvement Program, and long range Highway and Street Improvement Plan. Staff will consider the proposed improvements based on land use proposals, neighborhood plans, and the transportation elements and principles of the 2020 Community Character Plan.

Additional Planning Activities
- Continue neighborhood planning activities consistent with the principles of the 2020 Community Character Plan.
- Develop a Land Use Plan for the southeast area that delineates roads, connections among neighborhoods, residential and commercial land uses, and public and civic uses consistent with the principles of the 2020 Community Character Plan.
- Develop a detailed land use plan for the downtown working with the principles established in the Destination Downtown Strategic Plan.
2020 Community Character Plan
Shaping Land Use, Transportation, and Development

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Promote economic growth and efficiency
Promote social equity and justice
Enhance and preserve Des Moines' urban character
Promote a citywide approach to development with the neighborhood as the building block

Community Character Concepts
Preserve the strengths and importance of
Des Moines Traditional neighborhoods
Preserve and promote Des Moines' distinctive "sense of place"
Preserve historic districts and landmark structures

Transportation Concepts
Support balanced growth for the metro area
Encourage compact new development
Implement traffic calming techniques to slow traffic
Support development where buildings, not roads, dominate the city
Implement pedestrian amenities as an integral component of street improvements
Develop street improvements based on abutting land use classifications

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2020 COMMUNITY CHARACTER PLAN
The 2020 Community Character plan provides a framework to guide the city's physical development over the next two decades. It specifically looks at public and private development, land use, and transportation. The 2020 Community Character Plan is a part of Des Moines Comprehensive Plan and combines with other plans to carry Des Moines into the first decades of the twenty first century. Other elements of the plan include the Destination Downtown Plan, Park and Open Space Plan, Community Preservation Plan, and Housing Plan. The plan is also consistent with the goals and priorities of the Citywide Strategic Plan.

A policy document and map together constitute the 2020 Community Character Plan. Neither should be used without reference of the other. The policy document contains a series of land use analysis, goals, concepts, and recommendations to guide development in Des Moines. The policies are general and are intended to guide implementation strategies such as zoning map changes, a new zoning ordinance, and significant amendments to the site plan ordinance. The land use map identifies the recommended land use for land within Des Moines and its potential annexation areas.

The analysis completed for the plan concludes that many of the land use assumptions that dominated Des Moines Land Use Plans for the past fifty years are no longer relevant. It is a fresh comprehensive look at the physical character of city growth, with a broadened analysis of the qualities of our neighborhoods and commercial areas. One of the most important recommendations is the addition of new design standards to all aspects of development planning including zoning, site plan, and subdivision.

The plan has five major areas of focus:
1. Protect the valued qualities of neighborhood character while promoting a range of choice in housing and commercial services;
2. Promote traditional neighborhood characteristics and natural features in areas of the city to be developed over the next twenty years;
3. Integrate transportation design and improvements with land use;
4. Continue Des Moines' role as the primary employment center of the region; and
5. Improve the quality of development in Des Moines.

The City's Plan and Zoning Commission and City Council are responsible for the development and implementation of the 2020 Community Character Plan. Through policies in this plan, it is intended that the Plan and Zoning Commission become more involved in developing site plan and zoning ordinance standards that ensure quality development for the city's third century.
Recent Trends

The 1990s have seen the proverbial best of times and worst of times for the city of Des Moines. As the year 2000 approaches business is prospering and unemployment rates are at an all time low within the city. Interest rates have remained low since the late 1980s encouraging new development of all types. The downtown has seen the addition of several new office buildings that contribute to its vitality and skyline. The city’s population is anticipated to increase in the year 2000 Census continuing the second decade of a small population increase.

A major flood in 1993, rain and wind storms in 1998, and numerous blizzards have seen mother nature take its toll on the city’s natural and built infrastructure. While the city’s population has increased, it has been outdistanced and hurt by the phenomenal growth of the western suburbs. The predominance of the service industry has created scores of low paying jobs in which family members may work more than one job to make ends meet.

Planners are predicting several population trends that may impact land use decisions to be verified in the Year 2000 Census including:

1. The city’s population will increase slightly where as the county’s population will increase an estimated 10%. The City of Des Moines population will be approximately half of the total MSA population and slightly more than half of the population of the contiguous metropolitan cities.

2. Des Moines will become more ethnically and racially diverse. This is most noticeable in the younger age categories. Immigrants from northern European Countries, African Countries, and Mexico will increase the diversity of our city and need a variety of housing choices.

3. Household size will continue to decline slightly from 2.38 persons per household in 1990 to approximately 2.3 per household in 2000.

4. The trend of the past four decades toward an aging population will continue, although the average age of the population will still be relatively young. The percentage of persons over 65 will increase.

5. Population growth in Des Moines is focused in the SE annexation areas. Des Moines has seen almost 500 new dwelling units per year since 1994.

6. Des Moines house prices will again show an increase in the Year 2000 census. Median assessed value has increased 35% in Des Moines over the past nine years, from $52,000 in 1989 to $70,365 in 1998.

These trends will prove to be important factors in the validation of the 2020 Community Character Plan, because they will undoubtedly have an effect on the type of development (Public, Private, Land Use, and Transportation) that will likely occur as a result of population increase. The 2020 Plan will be able to successfully guide the City of Des Moines in accommodating these needs, while maintaining its existing character.
underlying principles
chapter 1

The strength of a comprehensive plan comes from the degree to which it reflects ideas that are broadly supported within the community. Chapter One expresses the basic principles that will underlie decisions about land use, transportation, and development within the community. These principles are important building blocks for the rest of the document. Achieving these goals is a long-term process that requires continuous effort through implementation policies explained in following chapters.

Sustainability Goals

The sustainability goals govern the overall development of Des Moines’ Comprehensive Plan. They represent the core values that policy makers, city officials, and citizens recognize as valid and essential to any development or expenditure decision. These include decisions about infrastructure construction, commercial and industrial development, housing, and park and open space development.

- Protect natural resources;
- Promote economic growth and efficiency;
- Promote social equity and justice;
- Enhance and preserve Des Moines’ urban character; and
- Promote a citywide approach to development while establishing the neighborhood as the unit of planning.

If development, land use, or transportation decisions are based exclusively on any one of the five goals to the exclusion of the others, the decision will ultimately not contribute to the long term stability of Des Moines. Together the goals create a synergy helping the city to grow in a balanced, sustainable manner. Balancing these goals is never easy. A time of confronting and resolving conflicting interests needs to occur so that all five of the goals are taken into consideration.
Protect natural resources.
The natural environment in the city is a precious resource that should be preserved, protected, and enhanced. Because the economic benefits of environmental degradation are temporary and the economic and environmental benefits of environment protection are long term, economic development gains should not be made at the expense of the environmental assets of the city and the neighborhoods.

Promote economic growth and efficiency.
The City must have a strong economy, fueled by a private sector able to compete effectively in the global environment. This is fundamental to maintaining the quality of life in Des Moines.

Promote social equity and justice.
Des Moines is striving for equal opportunities for all citizens, regardless of income, race, ethnicity or physical impairments. Existing and new development should reflect land use practices that provide diverse opportunities in economic development, housing, and education.

Preserve and enhance Des Moines' urban character.
Des Moines' urban character as defined by its densely developed downtown, its neighborhood areas containing single family detached housing integrated with commercial services and multi-family housing, and its unique landmarks should be maintained and enhanced. The valued qualities of the city’s character shall be carried forward with new development. These qualities include its sense of community, its neighborhoods, its wide range of choices, its human scale, its history, architecture, and high urban design, and its orientation to the natural environment.

Promote a citywide approach to development while establishing the neighborhood as the unit of planning.
Development should promote the city as a whole and not set one part of the city competing against another. Housing, employment centers, and commercial services need to be dispersed throughout the city according to natural land forms, relationships to adjacent land uses, and impact on the city’s infrastructure. Proposed development also needs to be considered within the context of the geographic area of its immediate neighborhood. Affordable housing, multi-family housing types, and employment opportunities have to be carefully considered for impacts on a neighborhood, but must be distributed equitably throughout the city.

This graphic illustrates the factors that must be balanced when analyzing a land use, transportation, or development decision. The city will suffer if any one goal is consistently given more weight than the others.
Community Character Concepts

Thousands of physical elements combine to give Des Moines its unique character. The downtown view, the rivers, and the rolling plains shape much of what we think of as Des Moines. But it is much more than that. The excitement of the State Fair Grounds, the diversity of shopping along Ingersoll Avenue, the gardens and natural areas along Fleur Drive further define the city. But there are dozens of more incremental elements. The gargoyles on the Polk County Court House, the cow and calf at Anderson Erickson, and the horn players on the French Way Cleaners on Euclid each add to our unique character. These and a thousand other pieces combine to make up Des Moines.

- Des Moines' traditional neighborhoods have character worth protecting in existing neighborhoods and duplicating in newly developing areas;
- Des Moines has a distinctive "sense of place" in its urban character; and
- Historic districts and landmark structures should be preserved and protected.

Efforts to protect community character are central to remaining a viable community. Pressures brought by a changing economy, population base, and declining tax base pose a challenge to retaining Des Moines' distinctive role in the region and the state. Too often homogenous developments are promoted that are indistinguishable from the same development in West Des Moines or suburban Chicago. If Des Moines grows it is threatened with sprawling suburbanization; If Des Moines does not grow, it is threatened with stagnation and continued tax base decline.

The City of Des Moines' Plan and Zoning Commission, through the 2020 Plan, promotes quality growth that enhances Des Moines' community character. Through high quality development, with designs that enhance the character of the community, it is possible to retain residents and build