

City Works on Update of 2012 Comprehensive Plan

The City of Huntington's Comprehensive Plan is full of facts and figures.

Those statistics show where the city's been, and where it is now.

Those numbers also form the basis for the city's aspirations and goals, a roadmap for where we want to be in the future.

"At its core, it's a land use plan," says Bryn Keplinger of the state-mandated document. "But our plan is so much more."

Keplinger, director of the city's Community Development and Redevelopment Department, is at the forefront of the plan's first update since 2012. With input from the community, Keplinger is working with the City Plan Commission and City Council to put together a plan that will continue to address not only land use but also more comprehensive issues such as the city's image, government services, economic development, housing, education, and more.

Keplinger has been working on the plan update since January, and the City Plan Commission started reviewing it during its meeting on Feb. 28. Several members of the community showed up at that meeting to provide input, and there will be more opportunities for public comment.

In addition to setting out larger aspirations for the city, each update of the Comprehensive Plan sets out specific goals.

One of those goals in the 2012 plan was to develop a post-secondary career center where adults could develop the skills they needed to get a good job. By 2016, the Huntington County Community Learning Center was up and running, a collaborative effort of the City, Huntington County Chamber of Commerce, Huntington County Community Schools, and other groups.

Other goals set out in the 2012 plan have also been accomplished — merging city and county emergency dispatch operations, developing a downtown marketing campaign, locating a new industrial park, and making improvements to Business-24, Riverside Drive, and Etna Avenue.

The goals for the 2019 plan are still being developed, with plans for more roadway improvements — including a half-million project to improve Park Street, Cottage Avenue, South Street, and Jessup Street — already written in.

The city's circumstances — along with the country's — are different in 2019 than they were in 2012. The 2012 plan was developed during an economic recession that no one was sure how long would last, with all-time high unemployment.

That turned out to be a "blip," Keplinger says.

Because of that "blip," the 2012 Comprehensive Plan centered on a need to fill empty buildings, preserve and protect jobs, and get people working, he says.

"Now, there are more jobs than people," Keplinger says. "There are good paying jobs if you have the right skills; and if you don't, there are ways to develop skills.

"Clean, available industrial space is about 97 percent filled. The buildings that are empty have environmental issues or are held up on ownership issues."

One indication of the improved environment is the increase in the median income of families living in Huntington. In 2000, the median income of a Huntington family was \$43,454. Ten years later, in the recession year of 2010, the family median income had fallen slightly to \$43,397. The latest available figures show that family median income in Huntington had increased to \$51,457 in 2017.

"That's the thing that surprised me, how much in that seven-year period that median family income had increased," Keplinger says.

Those figures reflect changes in the job market, he says.

"It's more competitive; there are more jobs than people. Skilled workers can command higher wages."

The Comprehensive Plan, Keplinger says, has played a role in helping the city reach this point.

"Businesses want to see a community that has a vision," he says, and the plan lays out that vision. "We want to be a quality place to live."

Both the 2012 Comprehensive Plan and the first half of the proposed 2019 update — it's being done in two parts — are available online for the public to read.

To access either plan, visit www.huntington.in.us and click on "Community Development and Redevelopment" under the "Departments" tab on the city website. The 2012 plan is under the "Planning" section on the left side of the page, while the proposed 2019 update has its own header in that same column.

Both the existing plan and the proposed update are also available to read in the Community Development and Redevelopment office on the second floor of the Huntington City Building, 300 Cherry St.

Residents are welcome to ask questions or make comments and suggestions about the plan by attending the next City Plan Commission meeting on March 28 at 6:30 p.m. on the third floor of the City Building.

Comments and suggestions about the plan can also be sent to the Community Development and Redevelopment office at bryn.keplinger@huntington.in.us.

The plan is expected to go to City Council for final approval in April.



Huntington North High School Health Services Instructor Stephanie Shady (left) watches as Kaitlin Aughinbaugh (center) and Erin Burke, students in the Huntington County Community Learning Center's CNA program, practice for their state tests. The Learning Center was established after the City of Huntington's 2012 Comprehensive Plan set as one of its goals the development of a program where adults and students could develop skills needed to get a good job, and several organizations collaborated to fulfill that goal. The Comprehensive Plan is now being updated, with new goals being set.



Student Mason Miller perfects his skills in the precision machining class offered at the Huntington County Community Learning Center. The Learning Center was established after the City of Huntington's 2012 Comprehensive Plan set as one of its goals the development of a program where adults and students could develop skills needed to get a good job, and several organizations collaborated to fulfill that goal. The Comprehensive Plan is now being updated, with new goals being set.