

The Bicentennial Plan

Unlike traditional comprehensive-planning processes, residents were asked to think and project beyond the usual time frames of five to ten years and consider the future of Kent even 50 years from now. One of the keys to sustainability is to think and project into the future, taking into account the here and now while considering what can be, respecting the idea that change can take a long time.

The Bicentennial Plan is organized around eight defined districts. Four rounds of public district meetings were held. Each round consisted of at least one meeting per district. The meetings were led and facilitated by a dedicated cadre of City resident volunteers from the Bicentennial Plan Steering Committee and staff from the Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service.

Additionally, three special planning areas were identified by the Community Development Department for more intense study. The special planning areas are sites that appear to be either problematic in their design and function or are locations that have special development or redevelopment potential and thus require special attention.

Partners in Sustainability

The City of Kent has a long history of interest in the concept of sustainability. In 1995, City Council approved the creation of an Environmental Commission consisting of five resident volunteers who would be tasked with studying sustainability in other cities and creating a mission statement and sustainability goals for the city. The Environmental Commission spent the next three years researching sustainability and writing a document titled *Goals for Sustainable Development* (see Appendix D). In April 1999, City Council adopted the Sustainability Goals as a guide for future development. As sustainability was becoming a community value without a clear definition, it became apparent to and incumbent upon the city to write a comprehensive plan that includes sustainability principles.

Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service Sustainable Communities Team

With the assistance of Dr. Eugene Wenninger, professor emeritus at Kent State University, the city's Community Development Department staff contacted the Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service Sustainable Communities Program to discuss the process for creating a Comprehensive Plan based on sustainability principles. The Sustainable Communities Team that was created has been involved in many different strategic planning processes throughout the State of Ohio. The team's coordinator, Bill Grunkemeyer, was very interested in the possibility of utilizing sustainability issues in the process of producing a comprehensive plan. According to Mr. Grunkemeyer, this type of project would be the first of its kind in the State of Ohio. The Ohio State team decided that they wanted to be involved in the project and offered to have their team

included in what they saw as a pilot project that could be used as a model in other communities throughout Ohio.

Design Team

In addition to the City's partnership with Ohio State University, there was a desire to involve Kent State University in the planning process. Kent State University President Dr. Carol Cartwright was very enthusiastic about the process and offered to commit her staff to assist with the technical parts of the plan. A Design Team was then created that included faculty and staff from Kent State University with specific areas of specialization related to the process. The Design Team was given the task of defining the characteristics of sustainability for the City of Kent and having those terms reviewed and approved by the community Steering Committee. The Design Team also was tasked with interpreting the district comments within the framework of the sustainability characteristics. These comments were used in the writing the Bicentennial Plan and are included in the Special Reports section of this document.

Steering Committee

In designing the process, it was recommended that a community-based Steering Committee be created to facilitate the district-meeting process, encouraging residents to attend the district meetings and determining themes gleaned from feedback received at the numerous Round One district meetings. Steering Committee volunteers were sought from all areas of the community, (i.e., neighborhood associations, community groups, churches, Chamber of Commerce, City of Kent Board and Commission members, and Kent State University administration, staff and students). The 46-member volunteer Steering Committee participated in facilitation training provided by the Sustainable Communities Team from Ohio State. The district meetings were facilitated by Steering Committee members, Ohio State University Sustainable Communities Team members, Kent State University Urban Design Center staff and City of Kent Community Development Department staff.

Kent State University Urban Design Center

The Kent State University Urban Design Center was contracted to provide master planning guidance for the three special planning areas. Residents provided feedback and direction to the Urban Design Center. In each round of district meetings, the Urban Design Center provided an evolving site plan for each site, including both text and graphic renderings. Staff from the Urban Design Center also facilitated each of the neighborhood and community meetings for the special planning areas.

The Process

The City of Kent is unique because it consciously chose to find a way to prosper using sustainable practices as their model. What makes the city's sustainable, comprehensive

land-use plan unique is that it was constructed with a focus on the following four elements:

- Inclusive Process. Sustainable planning goes beyond traditional public-participation processes by actively seeking to reduce barriers to resident involvement. Diversity in participation is built into both the plan governance and the process for seeking plan input. First, the Steering Committee is made up of residents from all sectors of the community to build in broad-based ownership and direction. Second, by going to where people gather—in contrast to inviting them in to public meetings—community residents feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings and are more likely to share their input for the planning process. The resident input was organized around eight districts. Four rounds of public district meetings were held in neutral locations where residents regularly gather. The first and second rounds gathered resident’s hopes and aspirations for the potential of their community. The third and fourth rounds sought reactions and suggestions for changes regarding the actual draft sections of the Bicentennial Plan. Each round consisted of at least one meeting per neighborhood. In addition, a few communities of interest also asked to comment on the plan, and sessions were held for their input. The meetings were led and facilitated by a dedicated cadre of city resident volunteers from the Steering Committee and staff from the Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service that comprised the Sustainable Communities Team.
- Interconnected Process. Sustainable planning seeks to find a balance among the social, environmental and economic sectors of the community. Residents make choices that lead to an intentional interconnectedness among the three sectors that balances and enhances each of the sectors as they act in relationship with each other. The final concepts for the three special planning areas stand as examples of the potential when we seek to find a balance among the social, environmental and economic dimensions of an issue. These three special planning areas were identified by the Community Development Department for more intense study. The special planning areas are sites that appear to be either problematic in their design and function or are locations that have special development or redevelopment potential and thus require special attention. The Urban Design Center prepared various concepts based on suggestions generated by residents. Each of the special planning areas contains concepts that allow for enhancing the local economy in a manner that respects the natural environment and stimulates social equity.
- Long-Range Perspective. Sustainable planning pushes planners and residents to consider future generations. While traditional planning often uses a window of 10 or even 20 years, sustainable planning pushes the process out 50 years or more. Such a time frame leads to a consideration of the impact that the decisions we make today have on our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Sustainable planning considers what we value about our community that we want to preserve for future generations and what we dream our community to be for our

grandchildren and great-grandchildren. When we stop focusing first upon our immediate concerns and instead think about our legacy, we can see more fairly what we need to do today.

- **Multidimensional Indicators.** Sustainable planning incorporates the development of clearly stated indicators. These shared, multidimensional measurements help a community to track its progress and determine how well it is progressing toward common goals and vision. Paying attention to indicators increases the probability that the Bicentennial Plan will be a living document modified as new insights and possibilities arise. The sustainable indicators intentionally link the three sectors (i.e., environmental, social and economic) so that what is to be achieved in one area has an intentionally positive impact on and benefit to another area.

The following pages provide the final results of this conscious effort to build a plan that provides a guide for difficult decisions as we strive to achieve a sustainable community. Most valuable about the approach used to create this plan are the involvement, guidance and decision-making by residents of the City of Kent. In the final evaluation, it will be the daily choices that the residents, business owners and community groups make that will determine the sustainability of our community. Therefore, it is appropriate that the Bicentennial Plan was created by the residents and then placed before their elected officials for acceptance and adoption. Now residents, the business community, local organizations and public officials have a clearly articulated destiny that overcomes any perceived limitations. This plan now serves as our template for where we wish to be in our collective future.

District Meetings

Four rounds of district meetings were held and involved eight to fourteen meetings per round. Each round distilled information and comments from the previous meetings. A key aspect of each round was the identification of sustainable-development principles as they related to residents' comments. These principles also were identified in the articulation of short- and long-term plans and goals for the City of Kent (see Appendix B for results of the district meetings and Appendix C for the meeting schedules).

The components of sustainability also were key drivers in the development of the site plans for the special planning areas.

Round One - Fall 2002. The goal of the Round One meetings was to define the values and aspirations for the Kent community and can be characterized as asset-based fact-finding meetings. Residents were asked two questions at these meetings:

- What do you value most about the Kent community?
- What do you hope the Kent community will become for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren? (See Appendix B.)

The question format is important as the goals of the questions are to determine what Kent residents consider to be important assets and values and how these assets and values can be projected into defining the future for the City of Kent.

Residents also were asked to consider the three special planning areas within this same context, though with narrower parameters. One of those areas, West Main Street, is an unattractive entrance into the City of Kent from the City of Stow. Kent residents were asked to consider this area in terms of its aesthetics and possible redevelopment scenarios; in the instance of what could/should happen if any of the very large and community-significant automobile corporate dealerships closed and/or moved from Kent. The dealerships' community contributions are integral to the tax base, employment and support of local not-for-profit organizations. Equally significant is the amount of potential commercial traffic that these businesses bring into the City of Kent.

The Campus Link Neighborhood has its own potential and community characteristics. This neighborhood is located between Kent State University and Downtown Kent. The concept for this review was an examination of the potential benefit to the overall community to "connect" the Kent State University campus with the downtown area.

The vacant parcel at the southwest corner of the intersection of State Routes 261 and 43 is a 55-acre site that has been the subject of controversial development proposals for many years. It was the intent of the public-input process to garner a community consensus as to what type of development would be acceptable to the overall community, while respecting the private ownership of the property.

Round Two - Winter 2003. Round Two provided the opportunity for residents to prioritize the general ideas, assets and values presented in Round One. All of the Round One responses were divided into three columns, each representing an element of sustainability: environmental, social and economic.

Meeting attendees were asked to identify their three top individual priorities in each of these three columns, using nominal-group technique. This exercise helped to show the tradeoffs involved in the social, environmental economic-development aspects of and interests in creating a sustainable community.

Residents were then asked to create linkages between the three columns and the selections that they had made. Could they find a link between an item in the Environmental column with items in the Social or Economic columns? What items in each of the three columns could be linked to make Kent a sustainable community? These linkages were then recorded.

Linkages also were created by analyzing the input provided by residents in the nominal-group-technique facilitation process. Responses were ranked, and the top three sets of linkages along with the linkages created in the district meetings will be used in developing respective district plans. The results are discussed in Appendix B and the respective district sections of the Bicentennial Plan.

In Round Two, residents reviewed and responded to the concept plans presented by the Urban Design Center for the three special planning areas. The West Main Street Special Planning Area featured a concept that identified three distinct commercial-use zones: Gateway, Mixed-Use Retail and Automobile-Oriented.

The southwest corner of State Routes 261 and 43 was represented with a concept that respected the topography and sensitive areas found at the site while incorporating the possibility for a mixed-use development that could include retail, office, research and residential uses.

The Campus Link Neighborhood focused on potential redevelopment of the neighborhood and possible locations for a proposed Executive Training Center, Hotel, and Multi-Modal Transportation Facility.

Round Three – Summer 2003. Round Three focused on the three special planning areas. Architectural renderings were prepared based on the conceptual drawings shown and the comments received at the Round Two meetings. Those comments are summarized below:

- West Main Street Special Planning Area. The West Main Street Special Planning Area straddles the Fairchild District and the Middlebury District. Three land-use zones on West Main Street were identified: Gateway, Mixed-Use Retail and Automobile Oriented. The Gateway Zone concept presented land uses featuring a residential-character architectural style. The Gateway concept also incorporates increased building setbacks. The increased setbacks establish a wider and greener entrance into the city of Kent. Buildings may be stand-alone structures or clustered. Parking for these buildings are in the rear of the properties. Joint parking areas could be established across parking lots to keep curb cuts to a minimum.

The Mixed-Use Retail Zone is a compact, more urban style of development. The setbacks in this zone are less than in the Gateway Zone. Buildings are oriented to the edge of the right-of-way and sidewalks. This creates a more walkable retail area. The parking in the rear yards allows for a transition from commercial uses and includes buffering for the adjacent residential properties. Rear entrances and pedestrian connections to the adjacent residential neighborhoods will be encouraged. In addition, a small green space is planned for this area and is intended to be used as a neighborhood-gathering place.

The Automobile-Oriented Zone will highlight the automobile-related businesses (the second-highest income producer for the city) in the area by creating a uniform frontage with setbacks and sidewalks to encourage comparison-shopping. No trees are planned for this area as the automobile dealers. This is to address their concerns that trees bring birds and bird droppings that deface the cars. In addition to uniform frontage, raised car-display areas will be included at interval locations throughout the zone, and the number of curb cuts will be reduced.

- State Routes 261 and 43 Special Planning Area. The State Routes 261 and 43 Special Planning Area is in the Plum Creek District. This area has a long history of controversy between developers (progress) and residents (preservation). The land is privately owned and likely will be developed in the near future. These site plan renderings propose a compromise in which the land is developed but in a manner that “touches the land lightly.” Two proposals have been suggested for this site: a mixed-use village and an office/research park. Both options include preservation of natural areas based on topography. This allows for green space that surrounds the development area. The conceptual designs also provide buffering of an apartment complex to the west and the undeveloped land (including the Kent Bog), situated on the south side of Meloy Road. Although a portion of the site will be preserved, the development is dense and concentrated in the center to create enough development to make the site profitable.

The mixed-use village concept includes an entrance directly across from Devon Place. The proposal also illustrates an intersection joining this development to S.R. 261 and the retail development to the north. At the center of the development is a retail area surrounded by townhouses and encircling a central green space. In addition, the second floor of the retail area could be used as apartments or combination living/working space. At the far northeast corner of the development close to this intersection, additional office space is proposed. The southwest corner of the development is used for development of 57 single-family homes. The concept also calls for 175 apartments and 59 townhomes. The entire development has the capacity for 68,500 square feet of retail, 134,500 square feet of office space and 395,000 square feet of residential development. Parking spaces could be shared between the residents (who would use them at night) and the office/retail employees (who would use them during the day). In addition, the potential exists for some employees to live and work in this area, thereby decreasing the number of parking needed.

The significance of this proposal is the mix of residential housing. The mix of single-family residential, townhouses and apartments could provide a new and unique housing market for the City of Kent.

The office/research park concept calls for 325,800 square feet of office space with some mix of specialty retail. The main entrance again would be directly across from Devon Place but with the potential for a right-in, right-out entrance to and exit from S.R. 261. Office uses are clustered around each of these two entrances. The location of retail at the northeast corner of the development is a possibility. The office/research park concept includes common areas within and around office buildings. The idea behind the research park is the ability to market this area as a high-tech office research and development hub and encourage spin-offs from the Kent State University business incubator to locate in this area.

- Campus Link Special Planning Area. The Campus Link Special Planning Area is located in the central business district. By far the most commented on and unique special planning area, the Campus Link Special Planning Area also generated the greatest number of conceptual plans. The five proposed plans offer some similarities, but each concept has its own unique qualities.

Two of the offerings illustrate Haymaker Parkway in its present location. Two other concepts show Haymaker Parkway ending at Depeyster Street. The stretch of the parkway between Depeyster and Main Streets would be vacated and become part of the Campus Link redevelopment program.

A fifth concept depicts Haymaker Parkway turning to the north and accessing East Main Street between Depeyster and Willow Streets. Also significant in this rendering is the addition of treed boulevards on Haymaker Parkway.

All of the concepts attempt with various degrees of success to tie visual connections to the Kent State University campus (in particular the Kent State University Fashion Museum) and include The Portage Hike-and-Bike trail as a major amenity through the campus area to downtown. Overall pedestrian friendly travel is a value in each of the proposed concepts.

Each of the concepts envisions additional retail development in the central business district along Depeyster, Erie and College Streets. Expanded retail also is recommended for the present DuBois Bookstore site.

New and upgraded housing is called for in each of the five renderings. Kent State University students, faculty and staff and young families could occupy the multistory townhouses and row houses proposed for this special planning area.

A major consideration for the Campus Link Special Planning Area is the location of a proposed Executive Training Center, hotel and multimodal transportation facility. Three of the five proposals locate these facilities along Haymaker Parkway. The proposed Executive Training Center, hotel and multimodal facility represent a unique partnership between Kent State University and the City of Kent.

- Commissions and Boards Reviews. At the conclusion of Round Three, a joint meeting of the Planning Commission, the Board of Zoning Appeals, the Environmental Commission and the Architectural Advisory Review Board reviewed the conceptual drawings for each special planning area. A PowerPoint presentation further illustrated the concepts being discussed and provided visual examples of the potential redevelopment of these sites. The Round Three comments, suggestions and concerns were shared with the group.

The majority of this feedback echoed residents' input at the district meetings. Overall, the meeting attendees were very positive about the vision emerging for the City of Kent. To quote Planning Commission Chairman Ralph Sinistro, "I was impressed by all three of the focus areas at the meeting the other night. I like the dream of making Kent look world class."

Round Four - Fall 2003. Round Four was the final round of the Bicentennial Plan district meetings. The purpose of the fourth round was to receive feedback on the draft plan and view the final renderings for the special planning areas. A focus-group approach was used in the meetings to answer three questions:

1. How well do the citywide tables capture your image of the Kent of tomorrow?
2. What implications do you see present in various choices in the citywide tables?
3. How well do the recommendations for the local district match your perceptions of local residents' goals for this district?

For the most part, residents confirmed and validated the information presented; however, many comments raised the concern that students' interests appeared to have been addressed inadequately. Many residents commented that they perceived students as being attracted by chain stores and felt that chain stores interspersed with locally owned business could coexist and. Therefore, economic development efforts should be focused in that direction. These comments also noted that this approach could be a mechanism for attracting students to shop in Kent rather than leave Kent to shop. It was also felt that this might be a way in which to "keep" students in Kent on weekends. These items have been added to the Community-wide Plan tables. As a result of these suggestions, there is a recommendation was made in the Community-wide Plan to resurrect and reformat the Town-Gown Committee. The purpose of the Town-Gown Committee will be to improve communication and understanding between students and permanent residents. The reformatting could include a group that is more grassroots and neighborhood based rather one that is guided, coordinated or led by the City and University administrations.

Requests also were made to add time frames to the Implementation Plan to follow. Time frames also have been added to the tables. It must be noted that time frames are tentative and may need to change based on available resources for each of the respective Implementation Teams.

In Round 4, presentations were made at all of the district meetings of the final renderings of the three special planning areas. Each of the representations was well received. A recommended conceptual plan was presented for two areas: West Main Street and Campus Link. Two recommended alternatives were prepared for the Southwest Corner of State Routes 261 and 43. One alternative combines mixed-use residential and office and retail space. The second alternative is an office and research park. Design guidelines have been developed for each of the special planning areas. Details of these design guidelines can be found in the Special Planning Areas section of this document.