Background of analysis

The ICF team examined relevant plans, codes, flood-related policies, buy-out program considerations, and other related local and regional guidelines to identify barriers to focused redevelopment of selected corridors (and the buildings and neighborhoods surrounding them), as well as opportunities for better enforcement and interagency coordination to achieve the community’s desired outcomes. We also considered potential changes to codes, policies, and programs that might better position the corridors and city for public or private investment and redevelopment. The documents reviewed include the 2002 Cedar Falls Comprehensive Land Use Plan, the 2005 Cedar Falls 10-year Strategic Plan, the Municipal Code (particularly the Zoning and Streets chapters), the Vision 2020 Downtown Riverfront Plan, the Zoning Code and the 2009 preliminary draft Subdivision Ordinance revisions, the Statewide Urban Standard Specifications (also called the Statewide Urban Design and Specifications, or SUDAS), the Cedar Falls Design Supplement (to SUDAS), Draft Floodplain Ordinance Revisions, Post-Construction Stormwater Control Ordinance, and a staff memo on North Cedar Falls Land Use Planning, along with several other documents.

To help identify which existing Cedar Falls codes, plans, and other guidelines either conform to or impede coordination with state policies (and potential for funding), we reviewed Cedar Falls policies in context with the Iowa Green Streets Criteria (which are used in funding decisions for the Iowa Department of Economic Development Housing Fund, CDBG Community Facilities and Services Fund, and Main Street Iowa Challenge Grant projects). The Green Streets strategies are intended to enhance affordable housing, community facilities, and town centers, while increasing resource efficiency and reducing environmental impacts. We also reviewed a Rebuild Iowa Office (RIO) “green paper” Recovering from the Storms, Planning for the Future: A Safer, Smarter, Stronger Iowa, which outlines proposed Iowa Smart Growth Principles, an action plan and strategies, and a framework for an integrated state-regional-local planning system. The RIO green paper noted that Iowa is one of only three states that does not include a list of required local comprehensive plan elements in state code.

In early September and during the late September site visit, we toured several areas of the City, some with staff and residents, including historic downtown neighborhoods, new subdivisions,
commercial corridors, and flood-impacted areas. We also met with stakeholder groups, staff from local, state, and federal agencies, business people, and elected officials, and conducted a planning workshop in North Cedar Falls. Although the public workshop focused on a specific area, discussion of principles, policies and plans were framed in the understanding that the team’s recommendations could be applied throughout Cedar Falls and neighboring communities. This was reinforced in a presentation and work session for policymakers and staff the next day, where we discussed a variety of examples of form-based codes, design guidelines, multimodal corridor planning strategies, and zoning overlay districts.

The initial draft of these findings were a first cut from the document review, intended to frame our discussions with local and state staff, policymakers, the development community, residents, and other stakeholders during the site visit and workshops at the end of September. The initial analysis identified several examples where updating and coordinating city plans, codes, guidelines, and programs could better position Cedar Falls for public or private investment and redevelopment. We used this analysis to test initial recommendations with stakeholders during the site visit, and these findings are based on that input plus our additional observations and review of other materials provided during the site visit.

Policy Review Findings

Cedar Falls has a variety of planning documents, regulations and ordinances that work together with public and private investment to help shape the character and quality of the community. The primary documents include the Comprehensive Land Use Plan, the Municipal Code and Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances, and the Statewide Urban Standard Specifications and Cedar Falls Supplemental Specifications. Additional guidance and vision is provided by the 2005 Cedar Falls 10-year Strategic Plan, the Vision 2020 Downtown Riverfront Plan, the report from the Citizens’ Visioning Committee for the Reuse and Redevelopment of Northern Cedar Falls, and other more technical documents like the Draft Floodplain Ordinance Revisions and Post-Construction Stormwater Control Ordinance.

Each of these primary or technical documents (when adopted) officially directs the development of Cedar Falls, while the vision documents – largely created with assistance from the City and policymakers – may have no official standing but embody strong community consensus. Like most communities, some of these documents are outdated, with the recent flood’s impacts underscoring the need for update. However, many of the more significant long-term issues are not flood-related, and have more to do with issues faced by every small town in America over the last few decades: maintaining the historic downtown as a competitive commercial and cultural center, while growing regionally in a more sustainable manner; supporting a thriving business and job-creation market; providing a range of housing choices for people of all ages and incomes; and protecting environmental and cultural amenities and attractions.

The single most important issue is that the 2002 Comprehensive Land Use Plan is outdated and largely lacking in vision, simply referring to the City’s Mission Statement: “To maintain and improve the safety and desirability of Cedar Falls through the efficient delivery of public services and the ongoing practice of open communication among council, staff, mayor, and the citizens.” Many of the other documents (especially the Strategic Plan) contain strong, clear vision statements, developed through broad community process. This vision belongs in the Comprehensive Plan, on which the regulatory documents are based, and should be created through a hands-on participatory process that can also help educate the public and stakeholders.
about new approaches to development. The City has expressed a desire to grow in a smarter, more sustainable fashion. This approach is also supported by emerging developments in state and federal funding policies. To move in that direction the City’s Plans, Policies, Regulations and Ordinances guiding this growth must have this goal embedded in each document, along with a coordinated set of specific objectives and strategies, to provide a clear foundation for the City’s decisions. The following sections summarize specific issues and potential solutions to improve the development policies used to shape the growth of Cedar Falls.

**Comprehensive Land Use Plan (2002-2022)**

In order to fully integrate smart growth and sustainable development goals into City programs, processes, and development and investment decisions, the Comprehensive Land Use Plan (Comp Plan) should be updated to 1) get consensus on a broad community vision; 2) outline a set of goals and objectives to guide planning and investment decisions; 3) incorporate (or establish a process for creating) more specific framework plans for areas like downtown, the riverfront, Center Street/North Cedar, the University Ave and First Street Corridors, College Hill, and large planned PUD areas; and 4) include a clear implementation plan (short, mid, and long-term) with specific actions and named lead agencies/departments/stakeholders responsible for each strategy.

Much of the broad vision is already evident in other documents, especially the 10-year Strategic Plan, which also incorporates a set of implementation strategies and specific lead roles. However, most of these plans are not as specific about the actual community design elements required to effectively deliver the community’s emerging vision. One key question to explore with City leaders and staff is the relationship between the Comp Plan and Strategic Plan, and why the vision and implementation are stronger in the latter. The Strategic Plan appears to have involved City leadership and staff in a broadly-based steering committee, but may not be an official City document; this same community-wide approach should be used to develop the official Comp Plan. There are also concurrent efforts to develop more specific concept designs for several corridors (Center, University, and First); if under way before a Comp Plan update starts, these efforts should be “wrapped around” by the Comp Plan process and “branded” in community meetings as part of the public process for creating a new Comp Plan vision and goals. This approach will maximize the public’s participation and usefulness of the individual planning products, while helping to get an overall Comp Plan update under way without significant added staff time and expense. There seemed to be general agreement about this approach (to use existing planning processes to initiate the Comp Plan update) in discussions during the site visit.

While it contains a great deal of useful background and trend information, the Comp Plan does not clearly set the development agenda, define key elements and features that make Cedar Falls unique, or describe specifically how the City will become more sustainable. Most importantly the Comp Plan does not begin to define the community character and identity – what it is that gives Cedar Falls its sense of place and how this might be enhanced and expanded through further growth and development. Without this overall place-based vision in the Comp Plan, it makes it difficult to attempt to use Zoning or Subdivision Standards to implement or enforce the community vision. Or to incorporate more walkable, neighborhood-scaled infrastructure design elements into the Standard Specifications and Cedar Falls Supplement. The set of documents reviewed contain many quality statements, which provide general direction for the City to provide services to development. Other than general statements like “coordinated, efficient, attractive and well designed development” they do not specify what type of development is
desired, what it should look like, or what defines the community character. Planned Unit Developments (PUDs or PDs) are useful as a tool to review large master-planned communities, but they tend to be reactive (to what developer proposes) rather than creating a broad vision and more specific framework plans for different parts of the City.

When updating the Comp Plan and related documents to incorporate smart growth and sustainability policies, it could be useful to organize the document according to established principles, such as the generally recognized smart growth principles, the Iowa Green Streets Criteria, or the emerging US HUD/DOT/EPA livability principles. While most communities and states prefer to use their own language, following an established set of principles can help ensure key issues are addressed. The smart growth principles include:

1. Provide a Variety of Transportation Choices
2. Mix Land Uses
3. Create a Range of Housing Choices
4. Create Walkable Neighborhoods
5. Encourage Community and Stakeholder Collaboration
6. Foster Distinct, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place
7. Make Development Decisions Predictable, Fair and Cost Effective
8. Preserve Open Space, Farmland, Natural Beauty and Critical Environmental Areas
9. Strengthen and Direct Development Towards Existing Communities
10. Encourage Compact Development Patterns and Efficient Infrastructure Design

The Comp Plan should be measured against these principles, to begin to illustrate Cedar Falls’ identity, character and sense of place, and set a framework for reinforcing them. Our initial review of the Comp Plan (and related documents) against the numbered principles above highlighted the following issues:

1. Transportation Choice. Transportation options other than driving are limited, except that the bikeway and trail system in the community is extensive and works extremely well. This trail system is a significant plus, compared to other communities, and we noted that bridges across the Cedar River already have separated, generous ped/bike facilities (some with “fishing bulbouts”). The downtown and adjacent neighborhoods – with smaller blocks, a connected grid of streets, shaded sidewalks, and moderate density – can be serviced well by transit. However the new developments, primarily to the south and northwest, do not maintain these same characteristics. Although they may have a bike trail, they are not “Transit Ready” – and the low density and general framework of developments makes them pedestrian unfriendly. Increasing transportation choice and multimodal mobility is especially critical for the almost 1/3 of residents who may not have full access to driving – young, old, disabled, or economically challenged.

A Framework Plan for the growth areas embedded in the Comp Plan would be an important direction to take. It would determine the location, type, and character of major roads and diagram an interconnected network (more like downtown than current practice), general land use patterns and mix of uses and also designate protected areas as well as how infrastructure would be provided and when. The existing major thoroughfare map lacks specific connectivity in the outlying growth areas, relying on eventual design by the development community. It would be a better practice for the City to lay out its desired network and require the development community to respond to its desired network plan, along with more specifics about a range of complete street
design elements (see section on Standard Specifications). This more specific network plan can be
detailed through the corridor and neighborhood-focused planning discussed above, and then
incorporated into the thoroughfare map and Comp Plan.

2. Mix Land Uses. The existing Land Use Plan does not encourage the rich mix of land uses and
development types found in the downtown in the other growth areas of the community. The
Land Use Map(s) identify large areas of single use such as large industrial areas, commercial or
residential areas, without a mix of uses in each zone. The Planned Development (PD or PUD)
Tool in the zoning ordinance does not have a set of rules embedded within it to promote an
integrated mixed use area. While this might be allowed if a developer proposed it, the typical
new developments seem to be continuing a separation-of-use approach. Developers like PUDs
for their flexibility, however, there is no clear set of design principles attached to the PUD so that
it achieves City goals. The projects (such as the Pinnacles PD) are designed in a suburban
manner, with little connectivity or land use integration. While overall they may contain a variety
of uses, they are not set within an integrated structure based on the historic character of Cedar
Falls – and end up looking like “anyplace USA.”

3. Housing Choice. While there is a range of housing choices in Cedar Falls, it is generally
confined to the older areas of town. The University area and College Hill especially provides
unique housing opportunities, with both the most choice and some of the nicest neighborhoods.
While a small amount of rental student apartments is occurring, the dominant new housing style
is very large lot single family homes, with virtually no variety in the new growth areas. Large
lots prevent a true mix of housing within a neighborhood – for differing ages, incomes, family
size and types – and for family members to stay in or near the same neighborhood as they grow
up, move out, start their own families, or grow older. The Comp Plan should include a
requirement for developments to offer a variety of lot sizes, building types, and prices, rather
than a large minimum lot size. Some communities are requiring a specific percentage of
affordable housing (per standard HUD definition) to be included (typically 10 to 15%), or
offering density bonuses in return for providing affordable housing. These units should be
included in the actual development, and not just cash provided for housing built elsewhere.
These policies would create opportunities for younger families, singles, seniors and a greater
variety of incomes to be within the same neighborhood. In general, the minimum lot sizes
prescribed in current code seem overly large, as compared to existing downtown patterns – this
affects housing choice, affordability, walkability, and water quality. Note – requiring housing
choice may or may not be allowed by state law; the permissibility of housing choice
requirements – also called inclusionary housing – varies from state to state. If the actual
requirement is not allowed, the Comp Plan could still set community goals and encourage
developers to design developments that strive to meet them.

In addition to requiring a variety of housing in new developments, the Comp Plan, codes, and
specific-area plans could encourage a broad range of infill housing on existing vacant lots,
brownfield and greyfield properties. Many of the existing code provisions (for lot size, parking,
etc.) were created for more suburban areas, and need to be adjusted to work well for downtown-
style development. Another strategy that could be added to the Comp Plan and codes is to
encourage creation of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) on any residential lot – a converted
garage or basement, or new cottage. This can give homeowners extra income, provide well-
managed rentals, and allow homeowners to age in place when they choose to downsize.
4. **Walkable Neighborhoods.** Creating walkable neighborhoods should be at the core of Cedar Falls smart growth policies. With a large network of bike trails and sidewalks, there seems to be a strong interest in alternative modes of travel and creating a non-vehicular dominated community. The City has an excellent model in its downtown, surrounding neighborhoods and university area, where walking appears to be a major travel mode. The newer neighborhoods and growth areas lack many of the features that make a neighborhood walkable, including limited connectivity and lack of nearby destinations. The subdivision regulations note a desire for connectivity, but this does not appear to be enforced. A regularly-enforced connectivity regulation is needed. Street design requirements can also promote walking. Narrow streets appear to be permitted in the Standard Specifications, but streets actually built in many subdivisions appear not to be the narrower streets allowed. This may be a City request or a developer preference, but a focus on narrower streets should be emphasized. The intersection curve radii are also wide and could be tightened, and median crosswalks and roundabouts included to control speeds and provide crossing refuges at intersections. Street trees appear to have fallen out of favor; shade is critical to pedestrian comfort and street standards should encourage tree-lined streets. It should be noted that Cedar Falls does encourage provision of a reasonable-sized planter strip in the Standards and Municipal Code (called “Parking” strip in the Code), which will allow for street tree planting.

Home design matters to walkability as well. The subdivisions in new growth areas have larger lots than original neighborhoods, and have eliminated alleys for garage access (the Code discourages alleys in residential subdivisions, but allows them in commercial districts). This changes streetscape character, with homes moved back from the street, large garages up front and wide driveways. With entry and porch no longer connected to the street, walking to stop and chat with a neighbor sitting on the porch is no longer a central part of neighborhood life.

5. **Community Collaboration.** There is strong community collaboration in Cedar Falls, though more focused on the downtown and along the Cedar River (and the emerging North Cedar Neighborhood Association), while surrounding growth areas appear to be developed with minimal or less public input. Growth in Cedar Falls is gradual, but at some point communities find their residents suddenly stand up against more growth as increased traffic changes community character. A clear set of principles, developed in a broad community process (including development stakeholders) and incorporated into the Comp Plan, will provide a framework for determining whether proposed developments are achieving a sustainable pattern, and fit in with the desired community character. The Comp Plan and codes could also establish a requirement that large developments include a design charrette process to incorporate community input into their concept designs. There is also potential for Cedar Falls to collaborate with surrounding communities to 1) develop a regional approach to stormwater management and flood control, and 2) develop a regional/metro supplement to the Standard Specifications that provides standard details for more walkable streets, green streets/low impact details, and pedestrian/bike/transit enhancements to the standards. This would be similar to the genesis of what became the SUDAS standards in the 1980s and 1990s, which was initiated by the central Iowa jurisdictions surrounding Des Moines.

6. **Sense of Place.** Many of the smart growth principles and elements noted above, when taken as a whole, work to create a distinct attractive community with a strong sense of place, like Cedar Falls’ downtown neighborhoods. Surrounding growth areas lack this character as developments became more internalized, not appearing to connect with the City’s vision. They are designed and marketed as individual developments, without a sense that they are part of a
larger whole. A subdivision is not a neighborhood or district; a collection of subdivisions and shopping centers do not make a town or city. The key question is – what makes Cedar Falls special, and how can the Community’s growth emphasize this character while still evolving? The Cedar River, the rolling terrain and riparian corridors, the majestic trees, the tree-lined streets, the walkability of the older neighborhoods, the closeness of homes to the street, the sense of schools as the center of the neighborhood, the ability to walk to a corner store or coffee shop? Or the 3- to 5-car garage and parking apron lining the winding, wide treeless streets through a new subdivision? The Comp Plan needs to establish both a clear vision and more specific character for future growth, enforced by the subdivision regulations and codes.

7. Predictability and Fairness. Cedar Falls has been successful in attracting businesses and retaining jobs and shops. This is due in part to its business-friendly policies, highlighted in the Comp Plan, and implemented with favorable development standards that provide a great deal of flexibility. We did not hear that the development community has significant concerns about regulations or is running away from developing in Cedar Falls. There are features including cost sharing for city-desired amenities, such as wider sidewalks, which appear to be more than fair and equitable. With this existing collaborative practice, if smart growth principles are incorporated into City policies and plans (with participation from development stakeholders), they would likely be generally accepted. Implementation should include a transition and educational process with the business, development and residential community, though some may continue to prefer to go about business as usual.

If the City conducts more specific area planning in growth areas prior to development proposals, this would provide a framework for the larger developments to build on, rather than continue to plan the areas on a piece-meal project-by-project basis. A Framework Plan for the growth areas embedded in the Comp Plan would determine major roads and interconnectivity, general land use patterns and mixes, designate protected areas, and establish a phasing plan for how and when infrastructure would be provided. This approach would help organize growth in a more comprehensive, fair, predictable and cost effective manner.

8. Environment and Open Space. The City is connected to the Cedar River and acutely aware of the need to protect and maintain open space and critical environmental areas. This extends beyond the flood plain and involves mapping of riparian corridors and other natural areas, which often are environmentally sensitive, beautiful and help give the community its character or sense of place. While the Comp Plan includes a parks map and a trails map, these should be incorporated into a comprehensive open space and sensitive areas map identifying both current systems and areas for potential future protection. Since much of the identified area would be on private land, it could still be general in its application, requiring further study or review if development is proposed, but with the intent to protect and preserve critical areas and links as development proceeds. General rules to consider would include setbacks from sensitive lands, providing open space in an interconnected corridor, and full protection for critical habitat. Within the comprehensive planning process the City may also find that there are locations, visual elements or features such as a knoll, hill or other geographic feature, which are intrinsic to Cedar Falls’ identity and worth preserving. This mapping can also provide the development community with direction about protecting natural and cultural features in their initial site planning.

One of the suggestions discussed during the site visit was to approach this planning process and mapping at a regional scale (at least for adjacent jurisdictions along nearby bends in the Cedar River). Since most of the flooded areas were clearly interconnected across neighboring
jurisdictions’ boundaries (water flows where it can), effective strategies need to take the same approach. Having a regional conversation (probably facilitated by INRCOG) – with updated floodplain mapping and awareness of recent flooding – could help each jurisdiction determine 1) where it’s best not to grow, 2) where a connected system of parkland should be preserved to help accommodate/control future events, and 3) where compact, well-connected growth should occur.

9 & 10. Compact Development and Downtown Reinvestment. The City is growing more quickly at its periphery, and becoming less understandable as a town. It needs to address two primary issues: 1) direct growth within its borders in a more detailed, focused manner to create an identity for new development areas consistent with City desires; and 2) ensure that development stays within urban boundaries, rather than move to outlying areas in County jurisdiction. This would make delivery of services more cost effective and help maintain a strong economy and tax base within the City. This topic needs to be discussed further between the City and County, but a close working relationship with the surrounding rural areas and neighboring urban jurisdictions is critical to maintain a more focused development pattern. Smart growth principle #10 encourages compact development and efficient infrastructure systems. Existing Comp Plan policies do encourage infill development and service delivery within the City, but there appears to be no coordinated set of incentives or firm requirements to build in a tighter, more efficient manner. To make better use of the existing infrastructure, the City should map a hierarchy of service districts, which prioritizes compact infill development within the City services boundary, and create these more focused sub-area boundaries. This approach should include support for targeted mixed-use re-development along existing commercial corridors.

By applying smart growth principles, Cedar Falls could better direct development through its policies, regulations and ordinances and provide through these implementation tools more direction as to what they are trying to achieve. Currently the policies we reviewed are somewhat stand-alone documents, which do not appear to be fully integrated and based on the same fundamental principles. Since many of the related documents are not too far off from basic smart growth principles, a bit of tweaking and prioritizing, some added design details, and some clarification and focus within the Comp Plan update, will ensure that Cedar Falls is well-equipped to move in a more sustainable direction.

Subdivision Ordinance and Standard Specifications

In addition to incorporating smart growth principles linked to a vision-based Comp Plan, there are some specific revisions needed to the Subdivision Ordinance and to Cedar Falls Supplemental Specifications to the Statewide Urban Specifications. Ideally, these supplemental revisions would also be created and implemented in cooperation with the surrounding local governments and the Iowa Northland Regional Council of Governments (the MPO), to create a design-oriented Metro Street Standard that supports Cedar Falls’ vision of sustainable, well-connected, walkable neighborhoods and business districts. The current description of roadways as arterial, collector, and local streets is somewhat outdated, since those terms describe suburban-oriented standards that assumed local streets would dump all traffic onto collectors, which would

\[1\] There appear to be several similar names for essentially the same document or process (sometimes on the same website) - the Statewide Urban Standard Specifications (also called the Statewide Urban Design and Specifications, or SUDAS), and Cedar Falls Supplemental Specifications (also called the Cedar Falls Design Supplement). This may be a factor of version control on different websites, or just indicate an evolving process. It appears that the Standard Specifications (an outgrowth of Central Iowa intergovernmental cooperation) are also in process of being integrated with Iowa DOT’s design standards.
dump their traffic onto arterials. While this is true in a cul-de-sac development, it doesn’t describe how a traditional neighborhood grid works, with local traffic diffused throughout the network, avoiding overcrowding of the main roadways. The description of connectivity does require a subdivision street system to comply with the city’s major street plan (if plan in force) and to connect to adjacent properties, but does not set up criteria to create a network of streets that provide alternative multimodal routes, with smaller block sizes and a hierarchy of local streets to create an interconnected street grid (like downtown).

Implementing an interconnected network includes narrower, naturally traffic-calmed streets, which will require adjusting the Subdivision Ordinance (SO) and Standard Specifications. The SO requires a minimum residential street ROW of 60', collector 80' ROW, and arterial 100' ROW. The SO’s minimum paved width of 31' for subdivision streets is too wide, and may induce speeding and excessive stormwater runoff. The Statewide Standard Specs do allow a 28' wide local street, with 17' shared two-way travel lane and parking on one side. We suggest reviewing the widths of existing downtown neighborhood streets (which appear to work well) and basing local minimum width requirements on existing network characteristics. Some cities have found that residential streets as narrow as 22' to 24' will work well – for a two-way yield street with parking on both sides. The Portland, Oregon, fire department determined that – given a well-connected neighborhood grid – the 22' standard gives them the required emergency access while contributing to overall improved life safety due to the natural traffic calming effect of narrower, tree-lined residential streets.

Cedar Falls’ Supplemental Specifications to the Statewide Standard Specifications do not appear to modify many of the street design requirements (overall, the documents are more oriented to construction specifications). Currently, the design speeds for local streets at 30 mph is too high (especially since the standards suggest a design speed of 5 mph or more over the proposed posted limit); streets currently being constructed are substantially wider than the original local streets; the intersection radii are greater, with a 15' suggested minimum; 4' sidewalks are minimum, and could be widened to 5' or 6' to allow side by side walking; street trees may be allowed, but are not always installed, creating barren streetscapes without shade; pedestrian scale street lamps at frequent intervals are not used, and there has not been any use of "green street" strategies as a storm water quality or management strategy, incorporated into the streetscape details. In Municipal Code (Sec. 24-68.), alleys are not recommended for residential districts except under unusual conditions (although minimum width is set at 16'). They should be encouraged in residential districts that are intended to be highly walkable, but with a narrower paved/graveled width (10' to 12') and overall 20' easement for utilities. In a residential grid, alleys should directly connect across blocks, for ease of garbage pick-up. Alleys are currently required in the rear of all business lots and shall be at least 24 feet wide, which is appropriate for commercial areas, dumpster access, and deliveries.

The ability to require access to be provided or created to special uses such as schools, parks etc. at the City Engineer’s discretion is good, but could be formalized rather than discretionary. Sharing costs of trails and other infrastructure between the City and developers is a good incentive for the development community when providing and connecting mapped recreation or trail facilities. While the overall trail network is good (and exceptional in North Cedar Falls), the connections to neighborhood walking and biking networks are somewhat missing. This is especially true along major roadways, and includes a lack of safe streets crossing tools like mid-block crosswalks, median islands, bulbouts to shorten crossing distances, or roundabouts at key intersections. With some of the neighborhoods isolated from the trail systems, that has the effect
of making the trail network more of a recreational facility that people drive to (with bike strapped to car), rather than one which integrates neighborhoods to each other, to transit routes, downtown, neighborhood parks, and recreation areas, so that walking, biking and transit are fully-reinforced transportation modes, and connection to nature is a part of daily activities.

In the Municipal Code (Sec. 23-68) regarding use of sidewalks for sidewalk cafés, these may need to be adjusted somewhat based on new street designs and a desire for “placemaking” in a variety of potentially “odd” locations in existing or emerging neighborhood centers. For instance, in some cases café’s small dining areas can be non-adjacent to the restaurant building (currently not allowed) – possibly in the planting area between sidewalk and curb, or in a larger bulbout area between parking spaces. These desired details may emerge in specific-area design efforts, and appropriate flexibility should be incorporated into the Code. Roping or fencing off the seating area is not critical unless state health code requires it. The Code also says that sidewalk dining is only allowed in the public R.O.W., but it should also be allowed in adjacent privately-owned area to give the feel of larger public space. It is required to be in a designated “cultural district,” which may also need to be changed to allow outdoor dining in a small neighborhood restaurant where appropriate.

Overall, to get the transportation networks designed and built to support the City’s emerging vision, we recommend a staged process. First, use the upcoming corridor and neighborhood design exercises (North Cedar/Center Street, University, First Street) to educate residents, the development community, and department staff on the advantages of more traditional street and urban design approaches (regional and state planners should be involved). Second, develop district overlay codes and design guidelines for each of those areas, based on what the community, agencies, and property owners think will work. The actual design elements would vary, since University, First, and Center Streets are very different facilities. Third, after testing and discussion (and probably in parallel with overall Comp Plan, zoning, and subdivision codes updates), incorporate refined design elements into both Cedar Falls’ Supplemental Specifications, local codes, a regional/metro supplement, and eventually into refinements of the Statewide Standard Specifications.

The key transportation-related elements that should be included in an overlay district (and eventually into updated local codes) include:

- A Framework Plan (replacing the Thoroughfare map) specifying how the multimodal transportation network will connect destinations and neighborhoods; including new types of roadways, specific connections, and linked to a ped/bike/future transit map.
- Street Design Guidelines for new facilities, incorporating the relationship between vehicular, walking, biking, and transit movements, along with diagrams of the relationship between street R.O.W. and building frontage, and street-front building activities. These should also incorporate design details for “green streets” approach.
- A Parks and Open Space plan, integrated with the pedestrian and bicycle framework (and current and future transit stops), showing how current and future facilities will be linked. This should also be integrated with a regional strategy for stormwater management and green infrastructure.
- A parking strategy, which should look realistically at the amount and location of parking needed at a district-wide level, and not by requiring each property to provide all parking required for their own operations.
Zoning Standards (1993)

The zoning standards are out-of-date and help create the significant disparity between the downtown area and the new outlying suburban style developments. The building setbacks of 20', 25', 30' or more for residential development, coupled with wider streets, make the relationship between buildings and street tenuous at best. This is substantially greater than the existing downtown area and dramatically changes the character of the community. The Mixed Use District requires a 30' landscape setback on all sides of the development, removing the incentive to create a mixed use development. Mixed-Use and downtown-style development should more typically require a “build-to” line (based on desired character and surrounding older buildings) that could be up to the street R.O.W. line, with little-to-no setback. Lot widths of 60'-75' are also wider than needed and do not emulate the existing historic pattern. There should be the ability to provide by-right a smaller-lot bungalow neighborhood in the traditional character, rather than submit under a PUD and have to work through all of the variations in development regulations.

One test is whether you can currently build a home similar to those in traditional neighborhoods under existing zoning. It appears that you cannot without a PD, so there is no incentive to do so. A 3,500 to 4,500 s.f. lot is much more efficient land use, produces less runoff, and is more affordable. Multi-Family densities currently top out at approximately 15 to 20 du/acre; consideration should be given to perhaps doubling these densities (or more) in appropriate locations, especially along commercial corridors like University. The thoroughfare commercial maximum density is 10 du/acre. As either high density housing next to services or as a mixed use development this is a very low density and should be significantly increased; aging commercial corridors (like University) are the appropriate places for higher-density housing. The R5 density of 3 du/acre is difficult to provide urban services to (including transit, which needs a minimum 6 to 7 du/acre for efficient service). The low density fixes the land in a perpetual suburban pattern, while still not creating rural qualities that communities generally believe the lower density will provide.

The Parking Standards appear relatively high. For Residential, two stalls per unit, plus an added space for each bedroom over two and then one visitor for every five units, is excessive; having visitors park on-street should be considered acceptable. For Commercial, restaurant and general retail parking requirements are high. In areas with a variety of retail and other mixed uses, shared parking should be allowed and calculated to reduce parking needs. The City should consider implementing parking districts to reduce overall parking needs and better manage operations within a commercial and mixed-use area. In a downtown, creating a “Park-Once” district – where customers park and then access all destinations on foot, or perhaps by circulator trolley – is both more resource-efficient, cost-effective, environmentally friendly, more social, and creates a better business environment.

The lack of ability to create a second unit within a single family home (or a cottage or converted garage on a single-family lot) reduces the ability to provide a unique high quality housing for students, young adults starting out, or seniors downsizing who wish to stay in the neighborhood. The zoning code could be amended to allow Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) on Single Family zoned lots where the primary owner resides. This allows long-time owners to stay in their home longer (“aging in place,” with added income), possibly to move into the smaller, more accessible unit eventually and stay in the neighborhood longer (“aging in community”).
The storm water management regulations address detention, but do not discuss other water quality storm water management techniques – green streets or green infrastructure – which incorporate urban-style low impact and best management practices such as rainwater gardens and pervious pavement. These should be included, and are probably best addressed in the Cedar Falls Supplemental Specifications to the State Standards, developed regionally as noted above.

The PD Zoning Designation provides a great degree of flexibility to create a quality design, however, it is important to provide a series of design guidelines, or parameters to provide developers some directions as to how the PD designation can be used to create a traditional neighborhood or mixed use community. These design guidelines should include subdivision, streetscape, site planning and building design guidelines with the goal of producing a more sustainable development pattern. Rather than evaluating each and every zoning district these are just examples of the disconnect between the current zoning standards and the desired sustainable development types, the existing buildings that define the character of the City, and the policies in the Comprehensive Plan.

As noted in the prior section about transportation design guidelines, updating existing zoning overlay districts (Downtown, College Hill, and Corridors) and creating new ones based on upcoming community planning processes may be the most efficient way to incorporate these changes so that they facilitate the desired development in a shorter time frame. We have not reviewed these current overlay districts as part of overall codes review, but believe Cedar Falls has a very competent professional staff, who can take the suggestions raised in this memo and determine the need for 1) updating current overlay districts versus 2) creating entirely new ones, or 3) moving directly into wholesale code revisions. In either case, some added training for staff, policymakers, development community and the public would be helpful.

**Draft Floodplain Ordinance Revisions and flood-related issues**

Overall, the Draft Floodplain Ordinance Revisions are well-thought-out, and the staff recommendations seem appropriate, especially regarding filling lots, recommended building elevations, etc. As is typical in post-disaster communities, despite what has been an extended public education campaign, and significant staff effort, some owners still appear confused by their rights, what the city’s strategy is (this may be an overall “trust issue”) and what is likely to occur around them. This may be partly due to the fact that different future uses can occur on properties based on the origin of the funds – for properties bought with FEMA funds, basically no development can occur; those bought with CDBG funds allow for more potential future uses.

Based on the discussion in prior sections about the need for a regional approach to stormwater protection and management, coupled with determining appropriate focal points for future compact growth, city staff should 1) work with FEMA and state agency staff to ensure that there is a short-term strategy to coordinate a “place-based” approach to target use of these two funding streams, and 2) work toward a longer-term strategy to ensure a larger regional strategy. One example that came up during the North Cedar public workshop was the idea of using some of the flood buyout properties to develop a regional ball field park (multi-field destination for tournaments, etc.). Since one often expressed concern was how the City would be able to maintain and secure a “checkerboard” system of smaller parks, such a larger strategy might help focus community attention on a positive outcome from the flood (but require a more immediate look at which funding source is buying which land, and what their underlying rules would allow).
Comparison with state policies

There have historically been few state planning requirements for localities, and limited state land use planning functions. Iowa is one of only three states that does not specify a list of required local comprehensive plan elements in state code – and does not even require an adopted comprehensive plan to establish zoning. After last year’s flood, state efforts and federal support have helped focus attention and resources on rebuilding and revitalizing Iowa communities along the lines of smart growth and sustainable development. The Rebuild Iowa Office (RIO) published a “green paper” Recovering from the Storms, Planning for the Future: A Safer, Smarter, Stronger Iowa, which outlines proposed Iowa Smart Growth Principles, an action plan and strategies, and a framework for an integrated state-regional-local planning system. While not adopted policy, the paper represents a direction that state policy may be moving towards. The proposed Iowa Smart Growth Principles are very similar to national principles, and if Cedar Falls makes the recommended revisions to plans and policies, they should be in keeping with these proposed new state principles.

The new Iowa Green Streets Criteria are already being implemented, but are not (yet) actually a statewide planning requirement. Since Cedar Falls does not receive their CDBG funds from Iowa Department of Economic Development (IDED), they do not actually need to follow the Criteria. They were developed for use in making state agency funding decisions, primarily for deciding which building and rehab projects to fund (for the IDED Housing Fund, CDBG Community Facilities and Services Fund, and Main Street Iowa Challenge Grant projects). The Green Streets Criteria are intended to enhance affordable housing, community facilities, and town centers, while increasing resource efficiency and reducing environmental impacts of public investment. Based on Enterprise’s Green Communities standards, which are also aligned with LEED for Homes, the Criteria include minimum standards that are mandatory, along with added bonus points. They are aligned with basic smart growth principles, and could coordinate well with the recommended revisions to Cedar Falls plans and policies, helping to support reinvestment in downtown areas and corridor redevelopment.

Cedar Falls might consider adopting similar criteria (or simply incorporate or refer to the state Criteria) to govern local public investment in community facilities, infrastructure, and affordable housing, as well as for review of development proposals. By beginning to align their new and updated codes and funding priorities to the Green Streets Criteria, Cedar Falls would have a recognized system to work with, and be well-positioned if the Green Streets Criteria become a required state-wide decision-making system. However, despite their name, the Green Streets Criteria do not really incorporate any details about street design, appropriate size, scale, design elements, or network issues, except for incentivizing sidewalks and requiring building access to sidewalks. Per the discussion in the transportation sections above, even if the Green Streets Criteria are used and adopted, the transportation-related strategies should also be incorporated into City codes and policies. This might be a discussion worth having at the INWCOG/MPO level (similar to the regional stormwater management issue) and determining if a regional approach to new, more walkable, multimodal “Complete Street” design guidelines makes sense to neighboring jurisdictions. These guidelines could be adopted into Cedar Falls’ and other jurisdiction’s Supplemental Specifications, become a new Metro Area Design Standard, and eventually be incorporated into updates to the Green Streets Criteria and the Statewide Urban Standard Specifications.