



Chapter 2 – Planning Process

This Chapter provides an overview of the process used to create the 2011 Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan, a description of the Steering Committee, and a summary of public involvement undertaken during the update of the Plan.

A. The Update Process

In 2003, the City of Grand Rapids adopted a new Comprehensive Plan after a year-long process of background studies, engaging residents and businesses, and detailed discussion. The 2003 Comprehensive Plan was the first long range plan completed by the city since the 1970s. Since adoption, many 2003 Plan goals have been met, including public investment in new street connections, new economic development initiatives, an updated zoning ordinance, and additional planning efforts such as the Riverfront Framework Plan and Downtown Redevelopment Master Plan. However, changing conditions, including newly annexed areas and manufacturing closures, created challenges and opportunities not envisioned during the creation of the 2003 Plan. In 2010 the City Council initiated an update to the Comprehensive Plan.

A Steering Committee of residents and businesses was appointed to guide the Plan Update and make recommendations to the Planning Commission and City Council. Members of the Steering Committee are listed on page 2-11. Using the 2003 Plan as a spring board, the Steering Committee worked with a team of consultants to: update background studies; integrate small area plans created for the downtown and riverfront areas; consider the plans of neighboring communities; review and revise the vision, values, and principles; choose a future land use map; and prepare goals, objectives, and implementation actions. Throughout the process, the Steering Committee sought public input through a community survey, focus groups, and public meetings.

2003 Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan

The 2003 Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan process identified a community vision, community values, and guiding principles. The vision, values, and principles guided the Plan recommendations for land use and development. City residents and businesses were integrally involved in the development of the 2003 plan.

The 2003 Comprehensive Plan content was organized around four topics: Community Facilities and Services; Transportation; Economic Development; and Land Use. Each topic area presented a set of goals, objectives, and implementation strategies for each objective. An implementation section described: implementation tools available to the City; a recommended plan update protocol; and an implementation matrix identifying a timeframe and organizations responsible for the implementation of each actionable item contained in the plan. Background studies provided an inventory of existing conditions and a discussion of issues and problems.

The Steering Committee for the plan update considered all pieces of the 2003 Plan in light of changed conditions and updated background information. Technical Committee members identified completed actions from the 2003 Plan and remaining actions that should be brought forward into the updated plan.

Grand Rapids Small Area Plans

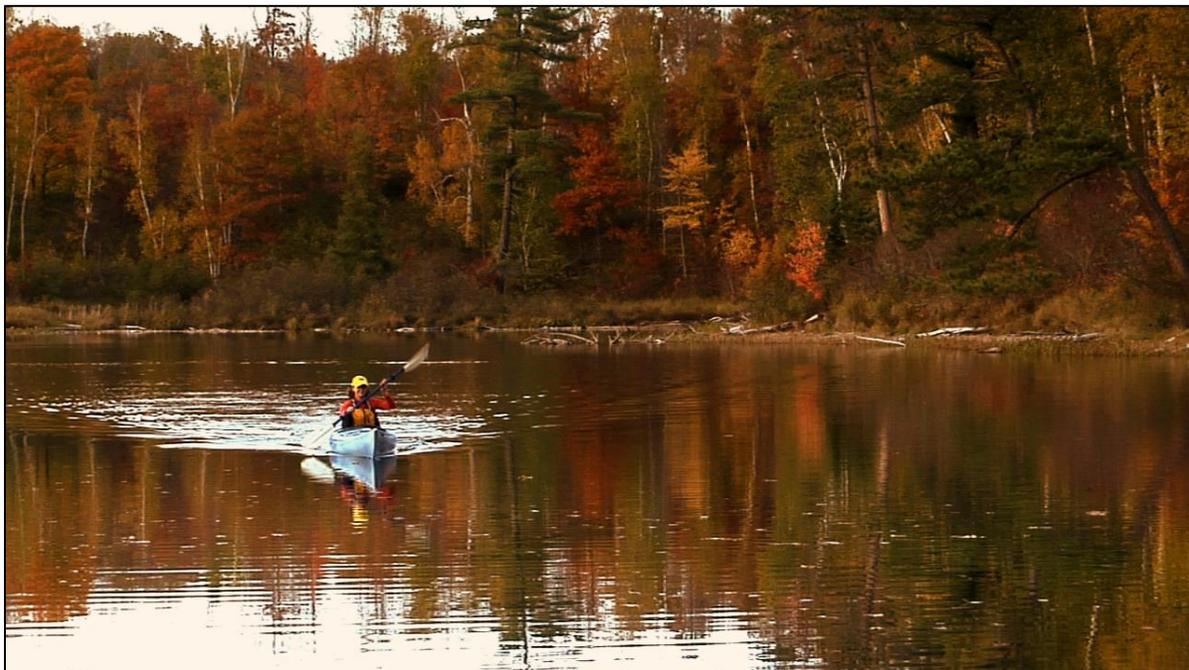
As a result of the 2003 Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan, two small area plans were undertaken by the City of Grand Rapids. The plans were reviewed and incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan update. The Riverfront Framework Plan and Downtown Redevelopment Master Plan are summarized below.

Riverfront Framework Plan, 2009

Originally prepared in 2000, The Riverfront Framework Plan was updated in 2009. The 2000 plan focused on the area north and south of the river on both sides of Pokegama Avenue, identifying a series of public and private redevelopment and improvement projects to better connect the community to the riverfront. Many of these projects were underway or had been completed by the time of the 2009 update, including: redevelopment of Grand Itasca Hospital into mixed-income housing; redevelopment of Grand Rapids Clinic into an assisted living and senior housing facility; and development of the new public library with performance area and fishing pier on the north bank of the River. The 2009 plan builds on these accomplishments and provides a vision for the next generation of projects. It complements the recommendations contained in the 2006 Downtown Redevelopment Master Plan and the 2007 Housing Market Analysis.

The plan includes goals for both public and private improvements. Public improvement goals are:

- Achieve greater utilization of the riverfront as a central feature and economic asset of the community.
- Provide and improve the physical and visual access to the riverfront.
- Create a riverfront park that integrates the north and south sides of the river.
- Promote and improve the festival area and performance stage along the river.
- Integrate design themes and linkages between the Downtown Central Business District and the riverfront.
- Develop a looped trail system that will integrate the riverfront with the Central Business District, adjacent neighborhoods, open space amenities, and the YMCA.





Private improvement goals include: redeveloping several remaining key blocks; providing adequate expansion area and coordinated planning with the Blandin Paper Company; protecting the quality of life and property values of existing riverfront neighborhoods; and attracting new housing opportunities in the central portion of the City, focusing on owner-occupied condominiums and market-rate apartments and affordable housing options.

Key improvements proposed in the plan include:

- Changes to the North Riverfront Park to create a waterfront plaza with performance stage and amphitheater, linked by strong pedestrian axes to Pokegama Avenue the Public Library and KAXE radio studio.
- Redevelopment of vacant parcels on 2nd Street for office and mixed use.
- Improvements to South Riverfront Park to open up views to and across the river, improve bicycle and pedestrian access, and enhance the existing canoe launch area.
- A new pedestrian bridge that would link North and South Riverfront parks. This is a long-term improvement, complemented by short-term improvements to the sidewalks on the Pokegama and Horn bridges, including widened sidewalks separated by bollards from the roadway, overlooks, and interpretive signage.
- Construction of multi-family mixed-income housing in the Canal Street neighborhood, complementing existing single-family housing.
- Implementation of streetscape, landscape and parking standards throughout the Highway 2 commercial frontage in order to improve circulation and attractiveness of this area.

Downtown Redevelopment Master Plan, 2006

The Downtown Redevelopment Master Plan follows and draws upon several previous plans, including the initial Riverfront Framework Plan (2000), the CBD Development Plan (1989) and the CBD Redevelopment Plan, An Amendment to the City's Comprehensive Plan (1996).

The plan focuses on the area bounded by the Mississippi River, 6th Street, NE 3rd Avenue and NW 6th Avenue, centered on the Central School Square and the "100% intersection" of Highway 169 (Pokegama Avenue) and Highway 2 (4th Street North). It includes guiding principles for downtown redevelopment, more detailed plans for five "opportunity sites," a detailed parking study, and proposed improvements to the major road corridors that connect Downtown to the larger city and region.

Guiding principles include statements that Downtown is "a place of character and quality," "well-connected," and "the best place for small business." Housing is identified as the future of Downtown. The downtown land use plan indicates a primarily commercial core, a civic core east of Pokegama Avenue, a substantially industrial riverfront, and mixed use and transitional areas on the north and south edges. Redevelopment of two centrally located blocks (Blocks 36 and 37) for mixed use is also intended to provide housing opportunities.

Reconstruction of 1st Avenue West is proposed with a similar design to that already used for 1st Avenue East, creating a pedestrian and bicycle corridor on the west side of Downtown. Pokegama Avenue is also identified as a pedestrian/bike corridor providing access to Downtown from the south. The plan also proposes improvements to wayfinding, riverfront and regional trails and community facilities.

The opportunity sites identified in the plan are:

- Block 19, which includes the Pokegama Hotel, has now been successfully redeveloped for mixed use.
- Blocks 36 and 37 are located on the south side of Highway 2 opposite the Central School Square and north of the railroad tracks; both are proposed for mixed use, with small “gateway” plazas at their corners.
- Block 29 contains City Hall and the police station; the plan proposes adding housing with underground parking.
- Blocks 17 and 18 – identified as potentially affected by Blandin expansion; improvements focus on enhancement rather than redevelopment, retention of off-street parking, and creating improved connections to the riverfront.

In the area of public realm improvements, the plan recommends placing new buildings at a 15 foot setback from the curb in order to provide space for wider sidewalks and street trees.

The parking study indicates that the supply of parking is adequate, but its distribution and duration need improvements. Proposed changes include permit parking, employee parking, and a designated lot for RV/trailer parking.

Implementation tools proposed include public financial assistance through use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts, special assessments and special service districts, in addition to land use controls and design guidelines.



Comprehensive Plans of Neighboring Communities

Grand Rapids is the center of a metropolitan cluster of four cities; Grand Rapids, LaPrairie, Coleraine, and Cohasset. The cities are connected east to west and all except for LaPrairie having incorporated or annexed out to the township lines. In addition to these cities, Grand Rapids shares its southern boundary with Harris Township, which has a substantial amount of development along the Highway 169 corridor and around Lake Pokegama. Several of the cities share infrastructure and municipal services with Grand Rapids, including wastewater, water, roads, electric services. Furthermore, as the economic and cultural center of these communities, Grand Rapids is critically interconnected with these communities; choices made by these communities affect the sustainability of community, gray, natural, and economic infrastructure.

These four neighboring communities all conduct their own comprehensive planning processes. Summaries of each community’s plan and notable issues discussed in the plans are noted below.

City of LaPrairie Comprehensive Plan, 2008

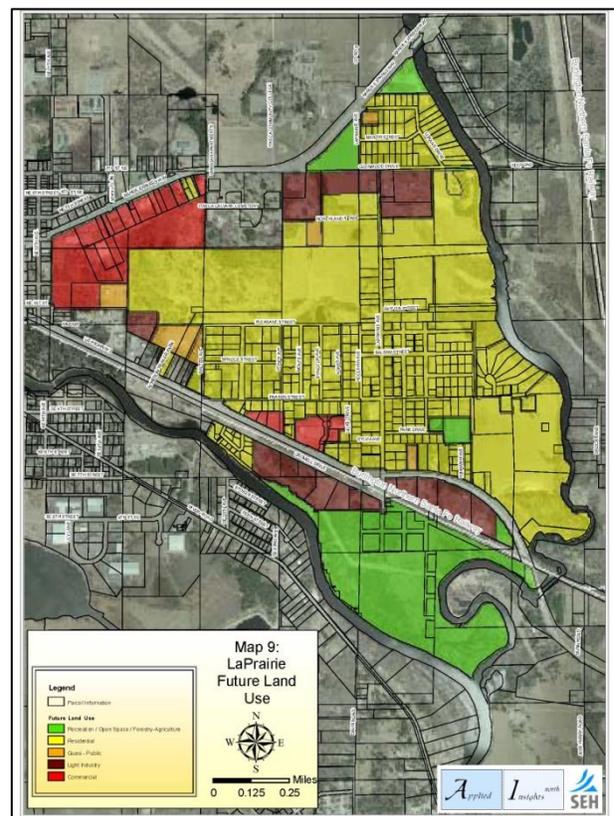
LaPrairie, like Grand Rapids, has grown through annexation, most recently annexing portions of Grand Rapids Township extending as far north as Trunk Highway 169. The city’s development pattern is primarily large lot residential, with a grid pattern of interconnected streets interspersed with some large tracts of undeveloped land. Commercial and light industrial uses are concentrated along Highway 169 and Highway 2. The city is crossed by railroad, pipeline and powerline corridors, limiting development potential in some areas.

LaPrairie provides water and sanitary sewer throughout its core area, both purchased from the Grand Rapids Public Utilities Commission. The Glenwood Acres area south of Highway 169 at the Mississippi River is not served by utilities.

Issues identified in the 2008 Comprehensive Plan include:

- Need for moderate rent senior rental housing units (identified originally in the 1999 Itasca County Housing Study), possibly a cottage-style design.
- Floodplain delineation and enrollment in the Federal Flood Insurance Program are needed for newly-annexed areas
- How and when will utilities be extended throughout the city? Community survey showed support for merging utilities with Grand Rapids.

The land use plan focuses on development of the Hoolihan Farm / Grand Rapids Township property (a large tract between the residential core and





Highway 169) for large-lot single-family detached housing, potentially with some cottage-style “active” senior housing, along with a second tier of commercial development south of Highway 169. The concept includes new through roads designed for local traffic and non-motorized recreational trails.

City of Cohasset Comprehensive Plan, 2007

The City of Cohasset resulted from the merger of the former Village of Cohasset and Bass Brook Township. The former village is the City’s downtown, located along Trunk Highway 2 a few miles west of Grand Rapids.

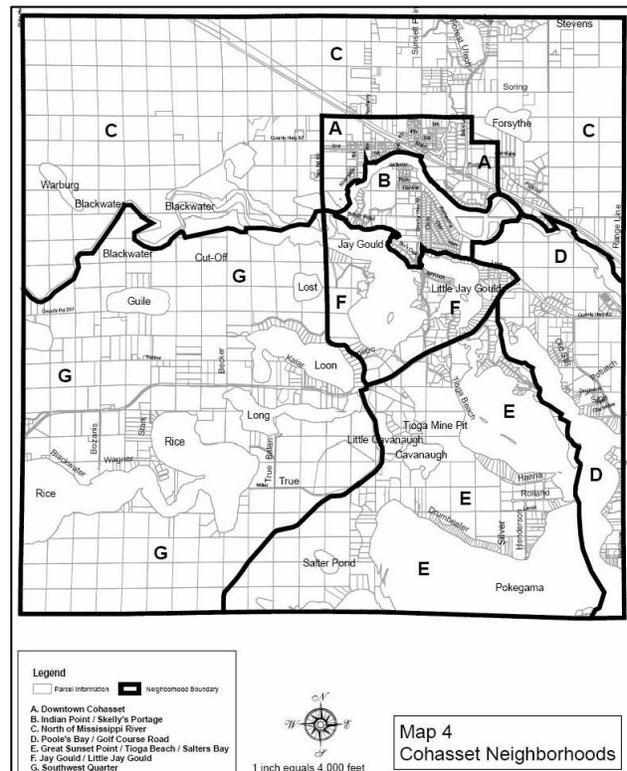
Issues identified in the plan include:

- Decline in the property taxes paid by Minnesota Power’s Clay Boswell electrical generating plant
- Water quality and rural wastewater treatment: The South Central Itasca County Wastewater Management Plan (2005, ARDC) identified areas of potential concern for pollution from septic systems (ISTS) within a six-community area including Cohasset. Three areas of concern were wholly or partially within Cohasset, all on the east side of the city close to the Grand Rapids boundary. Since the assessment, the South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board formed a Wastewater Initiative Team to address potential contamination issues. Strategies being considered were extension of central sanitary sewer service for some areas and creation of a sanitary district to improve management of ISTS in others.
- Historic differences between residents of the village center and residents of rural and lakeshore areas in how they view the city and its role and functions.

Primary community goal: To retain and strengthen Cohasset’s historic pattern of an interwoven village center and surrounding rural and lakeshore area.

The plan lacks a future land use map, but divides the city into generalized neighborhoods and/or land use categories and establishes goals and policies for each:

- **Downtown Cohasset:** distinctive core business district; upgrading of existing housing, encouragement of new housing; retention of core community functions; continued light industrial development; improved Mississippi River access.
- **Northern Cohasset:** innovative approaches to wastewater treatment to encourage residential development of large tracts; recreational trails to improve connections to downtown Cohasset.
- **Suburban Southeast Cohasset** (abutting much of Grand Rapids’ western border): encourage additional residential development with central sewers; retain existing commercial areas along CR 63.





- **Pokegama Lakeshore:** lakeshore redevelopment with greater compliance with shoreland regulations; explore options of enhancement of Tioga mine pit lake and tailings mound area.
- **Rural Cohasset:** retain essential rural character, combining rural and lakeshore residential development with some agricultural and forestry activity; surface water quality protection; no extension of public water and sanitary sewer.
- **Industrial and Commercial Development:** industrial focused on power plant and Cohasset Industrial Park; commercial within downtown and along Highway 2 to Grand Rapids. Support continuation and expansion of industrial park and power plant; improve appearance of Highway 2 corridor.

City of Coleraine Comprehensive Plan, February 2010

This plan was developed as part of the Itasca County Community Planning Initiative, consisting of a simultaneous planning process for five communities, also including the cities of Marble, Keewatin, Calumet and Bovey. The process consisted of training of local officials and staff, followed by a public visioning session and two public meetings to identify strategies and action steps.

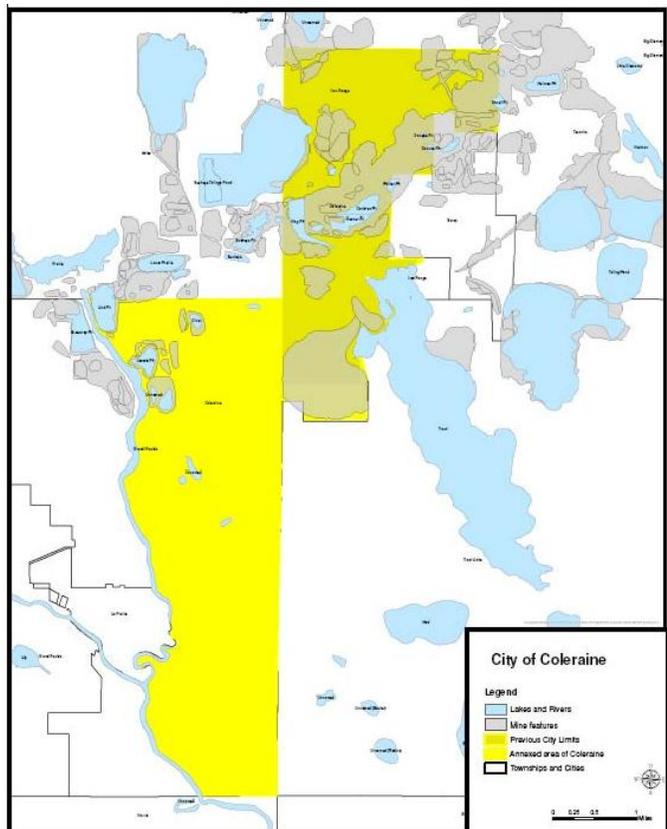
Coleraine was originally planned as a “model city” by the Oliver Mining Company beginning in 1904. Well-planned residential neighborhoods, an extensive park system and a vibrant downtown helped to keep the community stable.

The plan notes that through the annexation of the East Grand Rapids Township section (6,176 acres) in August 2009, the population of Coleraine increased by 600 residents and 235 households, for a total (estimated) population of 1,710 by the end of 2009.

The plan consists of goals and strategies in the areas of housing, transportation, utilities, agricultural, natural and cultural resources, economic development, intergovernmental cooperation and land use. There is no future land use map.

Strategies include:

- Pedestrian improvements, including a safe crossing of Highway 169
- Improve access to the Mesabi Trail with a signed connection to the downtown
- Plan for a new wastewater treatment facility in partnership with Bovey and Taconite





- Work with neighboring communities on recreational development of the Canisteo Pit Lake on the City’s northern boundary (this regional resource is relevant to Grand Rapids)
- Downtown revitalization and highway corridor enhancement strategies
- Zoning ordinance updates; adopt subdivision regulations

Harris Township Comprehensive Plan, 2006

Harris Township, bordering Grand Rapids to the south, is defined by its rural character, ease of access to Grand Rapids, and Pokegama Lake, with extensive lakeshore development.

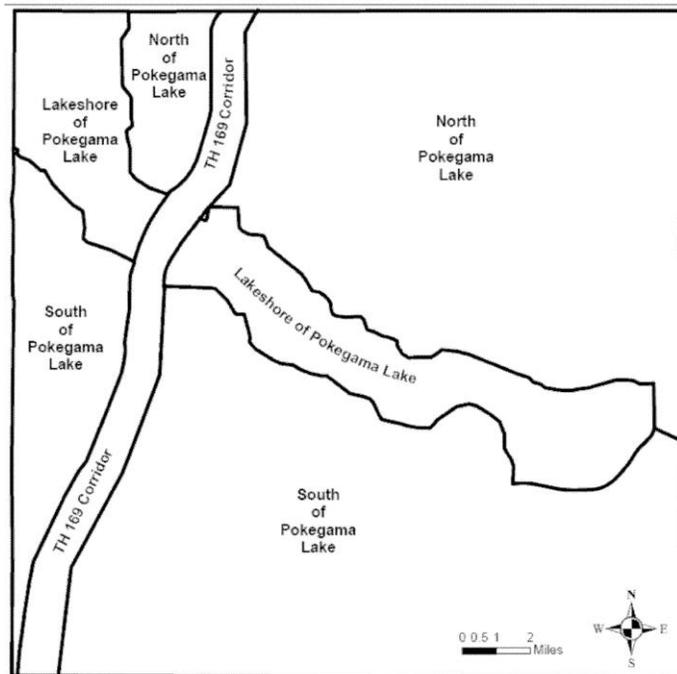
Issues identified in the plan include:

- Loss of defining rural open space and sense of rural character
- Southward growth of Grand Rapids; increased traffic and development pressure
- Concern over Rural Residential zoning (Itasca County zoning) leading to more suburban development patterns; spot commercial development
- Second home cabin conversions to year-round homes

Goals of the plan include remaining a rural, predominantly residential community. The plan does not include a future land use map, but includes conceptual policies for four sub-areas of the city – North of Pokegama Lake, South of Pokegama Lake, the Lakeshore, and the Highway 169 Corridor.

Policies include:

- **North of Pokegama Lake:** rural residential with a preference for conservation or cluster design techniques
- **South of Pokegama Lake:** farms, forestry and large-lot residential; consideration of non-zoning techniques such as purchase of development rights
- **Lakeshore:** residential development along entire lakeshore except for wetlands and public lands; improved shoreland management standards; solutions for failing septic systems
- **Highway 169 Corridor:** viewed as “scenic southern gateway to Grand Rapids,” limited to large lot, less intensive commercial development



The plan also recommends modifications to Itasca County zoning to promote conservation design, encourage clustered wastewater treatment systems, and create an “agriculture/forestry preservation overlay district” for the area south of Pokegama Lake and east of Highway 169, with residential density no greater than 4 units per 40 acres.



B. Steering Committee

The Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee was key to development of the 2011 Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan. Steering Committee members were recruited to represent a broad range of stakeholder groups. Officially appointed by the City Council, the Steering Committee worked closely with the project consultant team and City staff in the development of the Comprehensive Plan in order to ensure that the Plan’s vision, values, principles, goals, objectives, and strategies reflected the diversity of interests and needs in Grand Rapids. The Committee was the decision-making entity throughout the process and forwards a recommended plan to the Planning Commission and City Council for final review and adoption.

In addition to attending many meetings, reading background materials, and commenting on content, Steering Committee members were also a primary point of communication to and from other community members. Steering Committee members were very successful in recruiting residents and business owners to participate in focus groups and respond to the community survey. Some members even facilitated focus groups. Following is a list of Steering Committee members and the group they represented.

Frank Allen Business- Downtown Retail/Service	Jack Mooty Environmental Interests
Meghan Bown Healthy Lifestyle Interests	Ron Niemala Planning Commission
Joe Chandler Grand Rapids City Council	Ruth Pierce Versaw Social Services Representative
Marn Flicker Residential (rural resident)	Barb Sanderson Residential (urban resident)
Mark Gothard Residential (urban resident)	Colleen Swanson Health Care Industry
Ben Hawkins Education	Mike Twite Planning Commission
Mark Hawkinson Builder/Developer	Diane Weber Economic Development Organization
Joe Maher Business- Manufacturing	Ross Williams Residential (urban resident)
Tara Makinen Residential (urban resident)	Cheri Zeppelin Tourism/Hospitality Industry
Gary McInerney City Council	
Mark Miner Business- Non-downtown Retail/Service	



C. Public Involvement

Community Survey

As part of the Comprehensive Plan process, the City of Grand Rapids completed a community survey to assess the priorities and opinions on a number of issues being addressed in the Plan update. A similar survey was completed for the 2003 Plan.

A community survey is a tool that allows the City to solicit input from a broad cross-section of community residents on a variety of topics. Surveys also have limitations in regard to the depth of questions and the difficulty in clarifying answers. When used with other public outreach or involvement tools, surveys can validate or challenge other results. The 2010 community survey was conducted to assess the priority issues to be addressed in the Plan and to assess the validity of results from the public meetings and Steering Committee decisions. The 2010 survey was conducted in late Summer/early Fall of 2010, after the initial public meeting, several news stories, and completion of the Steering Committee's updates to the Community Vision, Values, and Guiding Principles.

The survey asked questions concerning the draft Vision, Values and Principles, and also laid some groundwork for creating the Future Land Use Map and the Plan's new goals and objectives. The Community Survey was developed with direct oversight by the Steering Committee.

The survey was sent to each property address in the City of Grand Rapids. In addition the survey was distributed in several rental buildings and a notice was placed on the City website. Approximately 3,700 surveys were distributed, and approximately 1,100 were returned, for a return rate of almost 30 percent.

The Steering Committee reviewed the survey results and used the results to shape the mapping, goal-setting, and implementation strategy selection throughout the planning process. A detailed discussion of the community survey results are provided in Appendix 2 of the Plan.

Focus Groups

An important part of the public engagement process for the Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan was a series of focus groups conducted by the consultant team and the Steering Committee. City staff and Committee members organized fifteen focus groups over a five week period midway in the Comprehensive Plan process. Some of the focus groups included people with a similar association or point of view, others were mixed affiliation. The size of the groups varied from four to ten people each.

The focus groups were:

1. Residents of Grand Rapids (two groups)
2. Non-profit organizations
3. Educational professionals
4. Students
5. Older citizens
6. Younger adults
7. Chamber of Commerce
8. Downtown Business Association
9. Land use, energy and water conservation
10. Faith community leaders



11. Riverfront Committee
12. Tourism and arts
13. Medical industry representatives
14. Leaders from surrounding communities

Most of the focus groups were conducted directly by Steering Committee members and reported to the entire Steering Committee in written and discussion formats. Each focus group used the same set of questions and a detailed script to ensure that the discussion covered the same basic material. The feedback provided by focus group participants was invaluable in shaping the Steering Committee decisions and in providing new ideas that had not been considered up to that point.

A detailed summary of the focus group results is provided in Appendix 2 of the Plan.