

West Area Plan

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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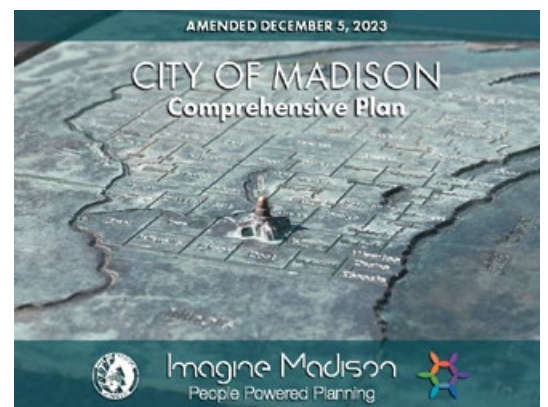
General

Q: What is planning and why does it matter?

A: Planning is the technical and political process focused on the development, design, and use of land and the built environment. Anticipating Madison's future needs and planning for the uses of our limited space is critical, and planning considers many factors, such as expected population growth, housing needs, the economy, the environment, cultural characteristics, and transportation needs. Planning is one of our most effective tools for limiting sprawl, slowing the loss of farmland, managing growth, slowing the increase in traffic, navigating change, and making tough decisions facing Madison, like where to invest in transportation, affordable housing, and parks. Without planning, Madison would grow in an undirected and haphazard way with many conflicting and incompatible activities and uses.

Q: What is the [Comprehensive Plan](#)?

A: The City's Comprehensive Plan covers many topics, as required by State Statute ([section 66.1001](#)). The Plan was shaped by an extensive community engagement effort called Imagine Madison, which included over 15,000 interactions with community members, creating a collective vision for a future Madison. The Plan seeks opportunities to address long-term issues, but focuses on action steps to guide the City's near-term efforts.



Q: What is an Area Plan?

A: In 2022, the Common Council approved [a shift to a new planning framework](#) with 12 Area Plans to simplify Madison's planning and make it more equitable. Overall, the City's prior approach to planning resulted in a variety of smaller area plans that were important to their neighborhoods. However, there were issues and challenges with this approach including the following:

- 70 adopted plans for different areas of the city.
- Plans that varied greatly in terms of when they were adopted (some date back to the 1980s), the size of the geographic area covered, the topics included and the level of detail.
- Recommendations in many of the adopted plans no longer reflect current City policies and priorities.
- Some areas of the city lacking a plan.
- Some areas of the city with overlapping plans - having different plan recommendations for the same geography can lead to confusion for all stakeholders.

The 12 Area Plans will be established over the next decade. After that, Area Plans will be updated every decade to reflect a changing city and keep Area Plan recommendations in sync with City initiatives.

Q: What do Area Plans cover?

A: Area Plans focus on guiding changes the physical aspects of our community, such as development initiated by the private sector and infrastructure improvements typically carried out by the public sector. Area Plan recommendations are structured around the Comprehensive Plan's seven elements.

Q: When will Area Plan recommendations be implemented/happen?

A: As with other City plans, West Area Plan is a long-term plan. The Plan will guide changes that occur incrementally over decades.

Q: How does an Area Plan relate to the Comprehensive Plan?

A: The Comprehensive Plan covers many topics and covers the entire City. The Area Plans apply the Comprehensive Plan’s recommendations to the specific geography and include a greater level of detail than the citywide Comprehensive Plan.

The portion of the Comprehensive Plan’s Generalized Future Land Use (GFLU) Map that overlaps the West Area will be updated through the West Area Plan process.



Q: How are Area Plans and the Comprehensive Plan used by the City?

A: The Comprehensive Plan and the future Area Plans are used to guide the types and locations of new development, identify locations for investment in public infrastructure (ranging from parks and schools to sewers and paths), and help prioritize what policies, programs, and investments the community wants to pursue with limited resources.

Q: When did the West Area Plan begin and how has the City engaged the public?

A: In January 2023 the City Council passed [a resolution](#) directing City staff to undertake the West Area Plan. Shortly thereafter, staff began working with the public in a variety of ways, such as:

- Established a project email list, social media posts, library displays, yard signs, and neighborhood newsletters with links to draft plan materials and public meeting announcements.
- Project webpage with planning process information, background materials, and draft plan materials for review and online commenting.
- 16 public meetings to date, with at least 5 meetings during each planning phase; kickoff meetings were held starting in February 2023 and meetings on draft transportation and land use changes were held starting in July 2023.



- Presentations for several different neighborhood and community groups and draft plan displays and gathering feedback at Lussier Community Education Center events.
- Community Partners engaged with residents who are typically underrepresented in city plans and projects. Partners led 3 focus groups during summer and fall 2023 and participated in numerous community events and activities.
- Coordination with UW-Madison PEOPLE Program at Vel Phillips Memorial High School (Precollege Enrichment Opportunity Program for Learning Excellence) and Lussier Community Education Center's Youth Action Summer Interns to gather feedback from younger, diverse residents in the planning area.

Q: How does public feedback lead to plan edits?

A: Staff reviews and compiles feedback received via in-person meetings, virtual meetings, on-line comments, and other methods. Feedback is sometimes conflicting – it is often not possible to accommodate all comments as plan revisions are being considered. Additionally, staff must consider comments alongside established City policies and analysis, such as the [Comprehensive Plan](#), [Complete Green Streets Guide](#), and [Impediments to Fair Housing Choice](#) report. Given those factors, plan edits are not simply a factor of tallying up how many people are in favor of something vs. how many are against. After reviewing feedback, accounting for recently adopted City policy, and coordinating between various City agencies, staff makes edits to a plan document. Ultimately City boards, committees, commissions, and the City Council have the final say as to what is and is not included in a plan. Edits can be, and often are, proposed by committees and commissions as part of the plan approval process.

Q: How can I stay up to date on the West Area Plan process?

A: The [project website](#) includes:

- Information on the West Area Plan process, including links to previous meeting recordings, presentation materials, and public review materials.
- A project email list signup to receive updates.
- A list of any scheduled upcoming public engagement events and board/committee/commission meetings.

Feedback and comments can be provided at meetings or via commenting on the plan actions and maps directly via the project website.

Q: What is the schedule for other Area Plan processes?

A: A map of area plan boundaries and a list of estimated upcoming area plan timeframes [is available here](#). Those interested in upcoming area plan processes may sign up now to receive project emails for future projects. Email updates will be sent when a project kicks off.

Land Use

Q: What's planned land use, what's zoning, and what's the difference?

A: Future land use maps generally show where different types of residential, commercial, employment, mixed-use, institutional, industrial, and parks and open space are recommended.

Zoning is a more specific [tool](#) that implements the plans if and when a property owner decides to build something new. It is an ordinance that regulates use, building form, and building location in specific detail. When a change in zoning is requested by a property owner it is reviewed for consistency with the City's Comprehensive Plan, including the Generalized Future Land Use map.

For more on the difference between land use and zoning please see [this summary](#).

Q: Does the City propose development projects?

A: Generally, no, with occasional exceptions, such as when City-owned housing is being developed by the Community Development Authority (CDA) on CDA or City-owned land. Development on private property is proposed by property owners, potential property purchasers, and developers. City staff are often invited to meet with owners, developers, alders, and neighbors to discuss the consistency of a proposed development project with the recommendations in City plans and City regulations (such as the Zoning Ordinance).

Q: Do City staff approve development proposals?

A: Some developments are allowed as permitted uses under zoning and only require staff review to ensure the project is meeting City ordinances and regulations. Projects that require rezoning or conditional use approval must go through review by various City committees, and sometimes the City Council. City staff help facilitate the review of development of those proposals according to the process established in the Zoning code:

1. Property owners or developers typically contact the City with any questions about the zoning requirements for a property, any other development requirements, any plan recommendations that might apply to a property, and any review and approval steps needed to develop a property.
2. If City review and approval is needed, City staff setup pre-application discussions with owners, developers, alders, neighborhood groups, and the public to review project ideas in relation to adopted City plans and policies. If required, the City will direct developers to apply for rezoning, conditional use, demolition, and/or land division review.
3. Multiple City agencies (sometimes as many as fifteen agencies), including Planning, Zoning, City Engineering, Traffic Engineering, Parks, Forestry, and Fire, review development proposals for compliance with City ordinances and consistency with adopted plans and policies.
4. In most cases, developers will need to present a project to some, or all, of the following committees/commissions for final review and approval: Landmarks Commission, Urban Design Commission, Plan Commission, Common Council, or others. The public may comment on a proposal during these city committee and commission meetings.

Q: What are covenants and do City plans and policies impact covenants?

A: A covenant is an agreement between parties regarding the use of a property. Covenants are sometimes put in place by a developer or homeowner's association during or after development of a subdivision. City plans, policies, and ordinances are separate from covenants. The City does not participate in drafting, reviewing, or enforcing private covenants, but enforces all applicable zoning, subdivision, and other ordinances regardless of private covenants.

Q: What is proactive rezoning?

A: Proactive rezoning is when the City, rather than a property owner or developer, proposes to rezone land so that it is consistent with plan recommendations. When the City proposes to proactively rezone areas during a planning process, it informs property owners about the recommendation and whether it could affect them. If proactive rezoning recommendations are approved as part of an adopted plan, the City would proceed with the rezoning process after plan adoption. The rezoning process includes sending notices to all directly affected property owners and those nearby, informing them of the process and Board, Committee and Commission review and approval meetings where public comment will be considered. The Common Council makes the final decision on whether or not to approve any rezoning.

Q: Why does the City look at proactive rezoning?

A: Proactive rezoning can help ensure implementation of future land use recommendations in adopted plans and prevent development inconsistent with planned uses. The City started reviewing proactive rezoning as part of the planning process when an Amazon distribution center was proposed for a vacant warehouse along Milwaukee Street shortly after the [Milwaukee Street Special Area Plan](#) was adopted in 2018. The plan's land use map called for residential and mixed-use development, but because the zoning for the former warehouse remained industrial, the Amazon project had to be approved as a permitted use. Due to that issue, proactive rezoning was pursued after the adoption of the [Oscar Mayer Special Area Plan](#) in 2020 to ensure consistency between planned land use and zoning. Additional proactive rezonings were implemented after the [Odana Area Plan](#) and the [Greater East Towne Area Plan](#) were adopted.

Q: Why are Area Plans considering changes to planned land use for institutions of worship?

A: There is a national trend of some religious congregations and places of worship shrinking, merging with other groups, and sometimes disbanding. Already, across the city, several places of worship are being vacated and, in most cases, land use plans do not permit an economically viable pathway for those sites to be reused or redeveloped. Area Plans are considering changes to planned land uses for institutions of worship to avoid vacant buildings and allow sites to accommodate needed housing if the institutions choose to make changes to their property. The City recognizes that many of these institutions are important community centers and gathering places and hopes they will continue to thrive. However, given national and local trends, plans need to recognize that some sites may change in the future. None of the proposed future land use map changes impact any institution's ability to continue the current use of their property.

Q: Why does the future land use map need to change at all?

A: Madison continues to grow and change. Adjustments to how the city grows and changes are made in response to policy adopted by elected officials on behalf of those they represent and in response to residents and the needs of the growing city. While the city does continue to grow out with new subdivisions on the edge of Madison, it is also growing up in the downtown, campus, and along many corridors throughout the city. The City's Comprehensive Plan calls for facilitating compact growth to reduce the development of farmland, with one associated action being to "accommodate a majority of growth through infill and redevelopment." With the Comprehensive Plan covers the entire city, it did not review planned land use at the finer-grained level of detail and engagement that is possible in an area plan process. The enhanced level of review can lead to adjustments in planned land use to further the overall goals, strategies, and actions of the Comprehensive Plan. With the city adding about 3,800 new residents a year, it is important to continue to provide a variety of living options in various parts of the city through new development and redevelopment.

Q: Why are so many future land use changes being discussed?

A: Less than 10% of the future land use map is proposed to change as part of the West Area Plan process. A significant portion of the changes are in University Research Park, where the Plan Commission directed staff to change the recommended land use from Employment to various mixed-use categories. Most of the remainder of future land use map changes are along major streets/corridors, pairing changes to land use with transit routes so more residents and employees have the option of transit within easy walking distance.



Transportation

Q: Is the West Area Plan process considering the City's [Complete Green Streets Guide](#) and its prioritization of pedestrians, buses and bicyclists?

A: Yes, the City's Complete Green Streets Guide, adopted by Common Council in January 2023, is guiding plan recommendations. This includes prioritizing pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders on most streets, according to the Guide's transportation priorities ("modal hierarchy").



As part of the planning process, City staff have also made recommendations to change or update the Complete Green Streets classifications of several streets in the West Area.

Q: Why do Area Plans show planned streets? Don't new street connections conflict with other City efforts like Vision Zero and Safe Streets Madison?

A: New street connections create additional route options to more locations for all users. Gaps in an otherwise connected street network reduces traffic on dead end streets at the expense of other adjoining streets, which must take on more traffic than they otherwise would. On a larger scale, funneling traffic to a limited number of streets and intersections decreases safety for all users, who must contend with intersections that become more daunting to cross. Further, planned streets, being designed according to guidelines in the Complete Green Streets Guide, can be built to safely and equitably accommodate all users. Existing streets can also be retrofitted to calm traffic.

Q: When will new sidewalks and/or planned streets be constructed and who pays for the construction?

A: Most planned streets would be considered for construction if/when property develops or redevelops, and developers pay for these streets. If no development or redevelopment moves forward the streets would not be built.

The City updated its [Policy for the Assessment of Street Improvements](#) in October 2022 – please review the Policy for assessment details.

Q: Does the plan aim to make driving and parking more difficult?

A: The plan, like many City plans, aims to increase the safety and comfort of all methods of transportation and give people choices in how to easily and safely reach their destinations. Often, in balancing safe and equitable access for all users, including those walking, cycling, and taking transit, some strategies, such as making streets narrower, can slow traffic or remove on-street parking in some areas. Reducing parking is not an aim of area plans, but can be a result of increasing safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders. Similarly, some of the actions that can be considered in area plans, such as “road diets,” (see below), are not included to make driving more difficult, but to increase safety for everyone, including drivers.

Q: What is a “road diet” and why consider one?

A: A “road diet” is a term used for the reduction of vehicle travel lanes without altering the street width. The “extra” space is usually then used to improve pedestrian and/or bicycle facilities. Road diets typically involve converting a four-lane undivided road to a three lane road with one lane of traffic in each direction, plus a center two-way left turn lane. The change in the traffic pattern can not only improve pedestrian and bicyclist safety, but also driver safety. The City’s first major “road diet” was undertaken on North Sherman Avenue in 2013, and a post-project [analysis](#) showed that the conversion



reduced speeding, greatly increased bicycling, and significantly reduced crashes, including severe injury crashes – all without significant changes to the amount of traffic on North Sherman or adjoining streets. Other road diets have been implemented since that time, including Odana Road in the West Area. Not all roads are good candidates for a road diet, but when a road diet is considered for roads at or below the traffic level of Odana Road they can bring major safety benefits to a corridor without impacting congestion.

Neighborhoods and Housing

Q: Is there really a housing crisis?

A: It's estimated that there is a national shortage of four to seven million homes, and the average rent nationwide has risen 30% since 2017.

Locally, Madison has seen strong population growth, household creation, and in-migration, but the creation of new housing has not kept pace, leading to an imbalance of supply and demand that affects both housing availability and housing affordability. Median gross rent in the city has increased approximately 40% in the last decade. More than half of renters are rent burdened, meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs. A healthy

rental vacancy rate that creates a balance between landlords and renters is typically cited as between 5% and 7%, but the rental vacancy rate in Madison is currently below 4% and has not been above 5% in well over a decade. Similarly, the homeowner vacancy rate is approximately 0.5%, much lower than the "healthy" rate of 2%. Slow owner-occupied housing construction and low available inventory contributes to tight markets that increase sales prices. The average assessed value of a single family home in Madison has increased by approximately 90% in the past decade and more than 20% of households that own their own residences are cost burdened. See the [2023 Housing Snapshot](#) for more information.



Q: Does Madison really need this much housing and change? Can't we slow down?

A: Over 2,000 new housing units are needed every year just to keep up with household growth. However, this would do nothing to address the backlog or any of the indicators of the housing crisis identified above. It would just keep pace from this point forward. Hundreds of additional housing units need to be built every year just to begin to slow housing cost increases. The past two decades have indicated that slow housing production does not slow population growth, household creation, or in-migration. During the 13-year period between 2006 and 2019 (after which housing production began increasing), approximately 19,000 housing units were built in Madison, while the number of households increased over by 24,000. Slow housing growth and consistent population growth places the burden of the tight housing market on the city's lowest income households, who cannot compete with higher earners who could otherwise afford newly constructed housing but end up paying higher rents for established, naturally occurring affordable housing.

Q: Does the zoning already in place allow the housing we need?

A: While this may seem like a straightforward calculation, it's not really possible to determine the answer because so many apartment or condominium developments depend on conditional use review. For example, the Traditional Residential-Varied 2 (TR-V2) zoning district allows up to 12 dwellings without a conditional use review, but up to 60 dwellings if a conditional use permit is granted by the Plan Commission subject to the zoning ordinance's standards for conditional use approval. The type of development that can be allowed also depends on adjoining property use, lot dimensions, and other factors. Outside of zoning ordinance considerations, a landowner must also choose to develop or redevelop, and many landowners that may have the capacity to develop more units under the zoning code do not wish to change their properties.

Q: What is missing middle housing?

A: “Missing middle housing” refers to a range of housing types scaled between single-family detached houses and larger apartment buildings. Housing types that are considered as part of the missing middle include duplexes, triplexes, four-units, rowhouses, live-work buildings, accessory dwelling units (ADU), clustered small homes like bungalow courts, and some small apartment buildings. The scale of missing middle housing is compatible with most existing single-family residential areas. The Plan identifies Low-Medium Residential areas intended to accommodate missing middle housing on the recommended future land use map. Missing middle housing types can also be accommodated in Medium Residential areas and in Low Residential areas.

Q: How does the City develop its population projection?

A: The City is projecting Madison will add approximately 115,000 new residents between 2020 and 2050. The projection is based on two components: growth trends established by the 2000-2020 Decennial Census and a modified population projection prepared by the Capital Area Regional Planning Commission. For more details see [this summary](#).

Q: How does the City coordinate with the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD)?

A: City staff have met with MMSD principals and other administrative staff from many of the schools in the West Area to discuss school-specific needs as part of the planning process. City staff regularly meets with MMSD staff and their consultants to review estimated housing development and population assumptions to help the school district anticipate and plan for potential enrollment changes. Additionally, a school district representative has a designated seat on the City’s Plan Commission, enabling the MMSD to be informed about and participate in discussions about all City plans and proposed developments considered by the Plan Commission.

Economy and Opportunity

Q: What is a TID? What does it mean to be included in the TID boundary?

A: Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is an economic development and governmental finance tool that the City uses to provide funds to construct public infrastructure, promote development opportunities and expand future tax base. The City seeks to use TIF to enhance the built environment in concert with adopted plans and to strengthen the City's economic foundation in an equitable manner. TIF assistance in Madison is only used when proposed development would not occur "but for" City assistance. A Tax Incremental District (TID) is a contiguous area identified for development using Tax Incremental Financing. Madison identifies projects in a TID plan to encourage and facilitate the desired development. As property values rise, usually due to development, the City can use the property tax paid on that development to pay for the projects. Owners of property in a TID pay the same rate of taxes that owners outside the TID pay. Being within a TID does not freeze or increase property taxes. It simply allows the City to dedicate money from increased property tax collections due to higher property values towards projects that benefit the TID. Public parkland is sometimes contained within the boundary of a TID to maintain a contiguous boundary with developable properties, but its presence within the boundary does not indicate it is intended for development. Similarly, other properties within a TID may simply be included to maintain a contiguous boundary, even when the TID plan or City plans do not plan for redevelopment of those properties.

Culture and Character

Q: What is an Urban Design District (UDD)? What impacts do Urban Design Districts have on development and building design?

A: Urban Design Districts ensure development contributes to creating a high quality, well-designed built environment within certain areas of the city. There are currently eight Urban Design Districts that are generally located along the city's major transportation corridors or gateways into the city.

Each Urban Design District is unique and establishes requirements and guidelines for new development, buildings, remodeling, or additions to existing buildings, some being more prescriptive than others. While the guidelines and requirements are different in each district, generally they address building design (building height, setbacks and stepbacks), design and quality of exterior materials and architectural detailing, lighting, signage, the design of private open space, landscaping, and screening.

Green and Resilient

Q: Can the City require that new housing and other development include solar panels and heat pumps?

A: The Wisconsin State Building Code prevents the City from requiring that new development include solar panels and heat pumps.

Q: Where can I learn more about the Sauk Creek Greenway and follow the design process for the greenway?

A: The Engineering Division is undertaking a design process for the greenway, which [can be followed on the project website](#).

Q: What is the City doing to preserve trees? How does the Planning Division coordinate with other agencies like the Streets Division and its Urban Forestry Section?

A: The City highly values its urban tree canopy and works to maintain and enhance it in multiple ways across various city agencies. The City's [2020 Urban Forestry Task Force Report](#) lays out goals and recommendations to achieve a diverse, resilient and thriving urban canopy. The Report recommends tree preservation and planting guidelines primarily in circumstances where the city has control such as with private development subject to city review, along streets, on the grounds of public facilities, and in parks and greenways. This report helps inform the work of city agencies like the Streets Division's Urban Forestry Section which is responsible for tree planting, pruning, and maintenance along city streets. It also informs City Engineering's tree management in stormwater facilities like Walnut Grove, Sauk Creek and Robin Greenways.

Engineering's ongoing [Sauk Creek Greenway Corridor Plan](#) seeks to stabilize the stormwater channel and create maintenance access, with considerations for the greenway's trees, vegetation, wildlife, public use, mobility and accessibility. Engineering has conducted an inventory to determine the number, species and health of trees to inform its recommendations for stormwater management improvements. Planning for the corridor will include additional public engagement and detailed design, with city review and approval anticipated in late 2025.

The Planning Division uses the Urban Forestry Task Force Report and other adopted plans and policies and coordinates with agencies like Engineering and Urban Forestry to make recommendations through its Area Plans to enhance the tree canopy along streets and on other public land, and in some cases through coordination with private property owners to create publicly accessible wooded areas that link to public greenspaces.

For more on the West Area Plan, including upcoming meetings, commenting/feedback opportunities, and project manager contact information, please [visit the project website](#).