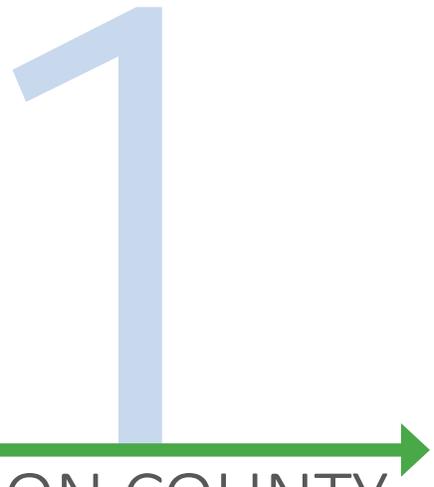


Chapter 1

# Introduction

- 1.1 Why a Comprehensive Plan? ..... 16
- 1.2 Iowa Smart Planning Principles & Elements ..... 18
- 1.3 Comprehensive Plan Process ..... 19
- 1.4 Public Participation ..... 20
- 1.5 Key Issues ..... 23
- 1.6 Demographic Profile ..... 25



# Introduction

## JOHNSON COUNTY

### [section 1.1]

The *Johnson County 2018 Comprehensive Plan: Sustaining Success Through 2028* was developed to guide the growth and development of Johnson County in a unified way. The plan addresses land use, housing, economic development, natural resources, sustainability, quality of life, and alternative and renewable energy—and their interconnections. Johnson County is the second-fastest growing county in Iowa with consistent double-digit growth every decade over the past 100 years. The plan provides a basis for balancing this growth with preservation of agricultural and environmentally sensitive areas.

## WHY A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

Johnson County adopted a land use plan in 1998 and updated that plan ten years later in 2008. The land use plan was a collective best effort to support growth and, at the same time, preserve and enhance the land and human and other natural resources that make Johnson County a desirable place to live.

While the 1998/2008 plans proved useful in guiding the physical development of the county’s unincorporated areas, this comprehensive plan is a more all-encompassing document. It considers the impacts of such elements as economic development, agriculture, and sustainability, as well as how to continue to provide the public a high quality of life through recreational and other amenities.

Johnson County especially needs a comprehensive plan as its rural and urban populations continue to increase. As cities in the county grow, the unincorporated areas of Johnson County experience increased pressure for expanded residential development. This comprehensive plan will build upon the mission of the 2008 Land Use Plan to support limited rural residential growth and in a way that preserves the agricultural and environmentally sensitive areas of Johnson County.

A comprehensive plan can also help the County secure grants or other funding that requires the existence of a plan as a condition of participation.



## THE PURPOSE OF COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

This comprehensive plan was created through an open process that included residents' leadership and engagement along with the participation of Johnson County leaders and stakeholders. The plan creates a framework to support the County's goals, strategies, and action steps formulated through this process. The primary goal of any comprehensive plan is to ensure the well-being of Johnson County residents, balance growth and preservation, guide how elements affect one another, and provide the basis for revised or new ordinances.

The legal basis for county comprehensive planning comes directly from the establishment of zoning and subdivision regulations in Iowa Code. Iowa Code section 335.5 requires that any county that wishes to adopt local zoning regulation must base zoning changes on a comprehensive plan:

*The regulations shall be made in accordance with a comprehensive plan and designed to preserve the availability of agricultural land; to consider the protection of soil from wind and water erosion; to encourage efficient urban development patterns; to lessen congestion in the street or highway; to secure safety from fire, flood, panic, and other dangers; to protect health and the general welfare; to provide adequate light and air; to prevent the overcrowding of land; to avoid undue concentration of population; to promote the conservation of energy resources; to promote reasonable access to solar energy; and to facilitate the adequate provision of transportation, water, sewerage, schools, parks and other public requirements. (Iowa Code, 335.5)*



[section 1.2]

# IOWA SMART PLANNING PRINCIPLES & ELEMENTS

In 2010, the Iowa State Legislature passed the Iowa Smart Planning Act in response to the 2008 natural disasters in Iowa. The act encourages local governments to consider ten best-practice Smart Planning Principles when developing comprehensive plans for their communities.

## Smart Planning Principles:

- Collaboration
- Efficiency, Transparency, and Consistency
- Occupational Diversity
- Revitalization
- Housing Diversity
- Community Character
- Natural Resources
- Agricultural Protection
- Sustainable Design
- Transportation Diversity



The Smart Planning Act also includes thirteen elements and topics that should be considered when developing a plan. The Johnson County comprehensive planning process took these principles into consideration, and each chapter addresses one or more of the prescribed planning elements outlined below. Additional information on the Iowa Smart Planning Act can be found Appendix A (Volume 2) of this plan.

## COMPREHENSIVE PLAN ELEMENTS:

- Public Participation
- Issues and Opportunities
- Land Use
- Housing
- Public Infrastructure and Utilities
- Transportation
- Economic Development
- Agricultural and Natural Resources
- Community Facilities
- Community Character
- Hazards
- Intergovernmental Collaboration
- Implementation

All of these principles and elements were considered and incorporated into the development of this comprehensive plan. However, the issue of housing diversity in the unincorporated areas, especially in regard to affordability, proved challenging. Most people choose to live in rural areas by choice or as a result of their occupation, such as farming. When siting affordable housing, it should be focused on locating units near services and employment centers within a city.



[section 1.3]

# COMPREHENSIVE PLAN PROCESS

This comprehensive plan was developed by a project team that included the Board of Supervisors, Johnson County staff, JEO Consulting Group and Confluence, and a 21-person Comprehensive Plan Committee (CPC). Community members applied to be a part of the CPC in 2016 and were appointed by the Board of Supervisors. The plan was created during an 18-month process that included four major phases:

## Profile

The process started with research and data collection to establish a “snapshot” of the past and present demographic profile and trends in Johnson County. Further analysis provided the basis for developing growth projections for future land use demands.

## Public Participation including Envision

The second step involved extensive public input to better identify the general issues facing the county. The consultant team conducted interviews with nonplanning staff, the Board of Supervisors, and other key stakeholders. They also conducted several focus group discussions and, with staff, hosted five public input sessions to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of Johnson County and the vision of community members and stakeholders. These sessions helped inform the practical guidelines that were developed in the Priorities and Goals section for each chapter for improving existing conditions and managing future growth.

## Priorities and Goals

The plan began to take shape with the collected data and collaborative vision generated through the Envision process. Goals and strategies were drafted to identify, assess, and create actions and policies regarding growth, land use, economic development, amenities, infrastructure, and sustainability needs. The finalized vision and recommendations were created, reviewed, and revised through multiple meetings with the CPC members and the Board of Supervisors. The Planning and Zoning Commission also weighed in on the goals and strategies during the public hearing process that took place between February and April 2018.

## Implementation

The final phase created step-by-step guidelines for implementation—a broad range of actions, tools, policies, and programs required to realize the plan goals and recommendations. Implementation of the development policies contained within the comprehensive plan depended ultimately upon the adoption of the plan by the Board of Supervisors. After plan adoption, achieving the goals depends on the continued leadership of both current and future elected and appointed officials.

PROFILE

PRIORITIES

GOALS

IMPLEMENTATION



[section 1.4]

# PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The JEO/Confluence consulting team conducted focus group meetings on a variety of topics, held personal interviews with key stakeholders, and held well-attended open house-style public input sessions, which averaged 40 attendees. Residents of both the unincorporated areas and cities participated as part of the Comprehensive Plan Committee (CPC). The complete list of CPC members can be found in the preface of this plan. An overview of all feedback can be found in Appendix B in Volume 2. Early in the plan process, JEO/Confluence established a website, [www.jocoplan.com](http://www.jocoplan.com), which the consulting staff and PDS updated throughout the plan process. Media outreach and publicity efforts were led by Johnson County and included these tools and efforts:

- Postcard mailing and posters
- News releases/social media
- Media/radio interviews
- Guest column in multiple newspapers
- Direct email alerts and through others' listservs

## COMPREHENSIVE PLAN COMMITTEE

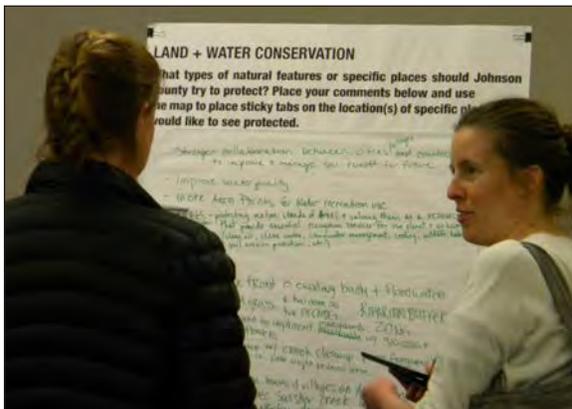
The 21-person Comprehensive Plan Committee (CPC) provided insight into the development of all parts of the comprehensive plan. With expertise in different areas, these CPC members from across Johnson County participated in a total of eight committee meetings throughout the 16-month process. A detailed list of meetings and summaries can be found in Appendix B of this plan.

## PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION

The Johnson County Planning and Zoning Commission held four meetings, including a public hearing, in early 2018 to hear input on, discuss, and provide a recommendation for the comprehensive plan. On April 9, 2018, the Commission voted 5-0 to recommend approval of the plan subject to 24 changes, including a change to the Future Land Use Map (FLUM). A full list of the Commission's changes, including their recommended FLUM, can be viewed in Appendix B of this plan.

## JOHNSON COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

The Johnson County Board of Supervisors took an active role in creating the Comprehensive Plan. A total of 13 meetings were held, including 10 work sessions, one listening post, and two public hearings. A detailed list of meetings can be found in Appendix B of this plan.



Members of the public talking during the Iowa City Public Library input session in March 2017.



Chris Shires, Confluence, speaks with a participant at Kent Park in February 2017.



## PUBLIC INPUT SESSIONS

The JEO/Confluence consultant team and county staff conducted five open house–style meetings during February/March 2017, including four evening and one daytime meetings. The consultant team and Johnson County staff met with the public at several interactive stations on land use and housing; trails and roads; economic opportunities; agriculture; land and water conservation; and sustainability. Participants shared written comments on poster boards, indicated areas of interest or concern on maps of the county, and voted informally on different items by placing colored dots on visual idea boards. Participants were also provided a survey (see Appendix B) they could complete as they visited the interactive stations or online after the event had concluded. This survey contained pictures of all the maps and informational boards displayed at the Public Input Session and was also available through the project’s website.

- **February 7, 2017, 6 to 8 p.m.**, Lone Tree Community Center
- **February 16, 2017, 6 to 8 p.m.**, Kent Park Education Center
- **February 22, 2017, 6 to 8 p.m.**, Solon High School
- **February 28, 2017, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.**, Stringtown Produce Barn
- **March 6, 2017, 6 to 8 p.m.**, Iowa City Public Library



*Nate Mueller, Assistant Director of Planning, Development, and Sustainability, talks with participants at the input session held at Kent Park in February 2017.*



*Jeff Ray, JEO Consulting Group, talks with participants at the input session held at Kent Park in February 2017.*



*Kate Giannini, Soil and Water Conservation Coordinator, talks with a participant at the input session held at the Iowa City Public Library in March 2017.*



*Five open houses were held to kick off the comprehensive plan process. The first, shown here, was held in Lone Tree in February 2017.*



## FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS

The JEO/Confluence consultant team facilitated seven focus group meetings from February 16 to March 6, 2017. The seven groups included the Johnson County Food Policy Council and other local food activists; the Johnson County Sustainability Working Group; local builders, developers, and realtors; the Johnson County Farm Bureau; conservation and environmental professionals; agritourism business operators; and Amish business owners. These groups were identified by the consultant team as important groups to interview through preliminary discussions with Johnson County staff and elected officials. Community members were invited to participate related to their direct involvement in each of these sectors.

## ONLINE PARTICIPATION & PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

Online participation was used to engage residents who may not have had the opportunity to attend one of the public forums. Utilizing online survey tools, such as Survey Monkey and Google Forms, additional public input was solicited.

During February and March 2017, 79 individuals provided their thoughts on the future of Johnson County via Survey Monkey. Of these participants, nearly half did not attend one of the five public input session meetings.

Additionally, a public comment period from November 28 through December 15, 2017, allowed the public to provide feedback on a draft of the plan. Input was provided during a public open house held on December 5, 2017, through an online survey, and via email to the plan's email address. Seventeen people filled out the survey.

All survey responses are included in Appendix B of Volume 2 of this plan.

## INTERVIEWS

The Planning, Development and Sustainability Department staff worked with the consultant team to identify key stakeholders to interview for the comprehensive plan because of their expertise. The following individuals and groups participated in interviews as part of the Envision process:

- **Rod Sullivan**, Johnson County Board of Supervisors
- **Lisa Green-Douglass**, Johnson County Board of Supervisors
- **Kurt Friese**, Johnson County Board of Supervisors
- **Mike Carberry**, Johnson County Board of Supervisors
- **Janelle Rettig**, Johnson County Board of Supervisors
- **Greg Parker**, County Engineer for Johnson County Secondary Roads Department
- **Mark Ogden**, Johnson County Farm Bureau President, and **Jerry Anderson**, Regional Manager for Iowa Farm Bureau Federation
- **Tricia Kitzmann**, Interim Director, and **James Lacina**, Environmental Health Coordinator, Johnson County Public Health
- **Mark Nolte**, Executive Director for Iowa City Area Development Group
- **Tracey Achenbach**, Executive Director for Housing Trust Fund of Johnson County
- **Larry Gullett**, Director for Johnson County Conservation Department



[section 1.5]

# KEY ISSUES

This section briefly reviews five key topics that are referenced throughout the comprehensive plan.

## AGRICULTURAL LAND & NATURAL AREAS PRESERVATION

As a rapidly and consistently growing county, Johnson County experiences non-agricultural development pressures that many Iowa counties do not experience. While the majority of that growth is happening within the cities, the growth also presents challenges to comprehensive planning for the unincorporated areas. Land preservation is a prominent feature throughout this plan—from the guidance in State Code section 335.5 to preserve the availability of agricultural land, to Johnson County’s ordinances directed at sensitive area protection and stormwater management. The need to balance the preservation of agriculturally and environmentally valuable areas with the growth pressures of many thriving communities impacts all areas of this plan.

## DEVELOPMENT AREAS

Johnson County has been proactive in preserving rural agricultural land from the pressures of urban residential sprawl. One successful strategy in Johnson County has been establishing a clearly delineated development area to which to direct new rural housing. For Johnson County, this area was in the North Corridor, which was identified for residential growth as early as 1979, but initially lacked distinct boundaries or an official policy-based description.

By 1982, a plan was written to limit the impacts of nonfarm development on agriculture, calling for non-agricultural growth to be located in the North Corridor. The development area was then generally defined as the area between Highway 1 on the east and Highway 965 on the west, extending north from the city limits of Iowa City and Coralville, and east of North Liberty to the Linn County border and including all or parts of Big Grove, Jefferson, Newport, and Penn townships (map in Appendix A).

Subsequently, in the 1998 and 2008 Land Use Plans, the area was formalized into what became known as the North Corridor Development Area, or NCDA. The NCDA was broken into two phases, given defined boundaries, and was formalized into the growth area policies of those plans. The Board of Supervisors has never implemented Phase II of the NCDA as originally envisioned in 1998; however, from 1998 to the time of this comprehensive plan publication, the North Corridor has been the most rapidly growing portion of unincorporated Johnson County based on both population growth and available building permit data.

Since the NCDA was formalized in 1998, some NCDA residents and elected officials have been concerned that existing infrastructure and environmentally sensitive areas are suffering in the face of continued development pressure. The comprehensive planning process carefully considered whether other parts of the county outside the NCDA were appropriate for non-agricultural growth. The Future Land Use Map included on page 111 in Chapter 5 identifies the growth areas for this plan; while there is overlap with the preexisting NCDA, those areas as they were defined in the 2008 Land Use Plan are not included as part of the Future Land Use Map.

## FRINGE AREA DEVELOPMENT

Many issues related to planning and development are regional in nature and cross municipal boundaries. Iowa Code grants "extraterritorial jurisdiction" to incorporated cities, in which the



cities have the authority to review all subdivisions within 2 miles of city limits. In these "fringe areas," Johnson County has entered into cooperative agreements with individual cities to more clearly address the mutual concerns that unincorporated development near a municipal boundary can present. These agreements are typically administered through a 28E Agreement between the affected city and the County, and generally include the majority of the two-mile extraterritorial limit.

Several goals of this plan highlight the need to review fringe area agreements, both to protect the designated immediate growth areas of the individual cities, but also to ensure that nongrowth areas can be developed or preserved in accordance with County priorities. As of 2017, many of the existing 28E agreements have expired or are nearing the sunset of their agreed-upon term. Additionally, several of Johnson County's smaller cities have recently adopted updated comprehensive plans, which often update projected growth areas and trigger a need to review existing agreements. See Appendix A to view agreement boundaries in effect at the time this plan was adopted, as well as the tentative schedule for reviewing and potentially updating the various agreements.

## **FARMING & THE AGRICULTURAL EXEMPTION**

As of early 2018, the current definition of a farm in Johnson County is a tract of land that is agriculturally zoned and, "no less than 40 contiguous acres, or a 1/4 of a 1/4 of a Section, as legally described and recorded, while used for agricultural purposes." Per the Iowa State Code (chapter 335, section 335.2), no zoning regulation or ordinance shall be applied "to land, farm houses, farm barns, farm outbuildings or other buildings or structures which are primarily adapted, by reason of nature and area, for use for agricultural purposes, while so used" in a particular tract of land. This exemption means that the property is exempt from all local zoning and building permit regulations with the exception of Floodplain Regulations (see Code of Iowa 331.304.3b). At the time this comprehensive plan was adopted, a farmer operating on a tract of land less than 40 acres that is both used and zoned agriculturally must meet all zoning and building permit requirements to construct a house and other farm infrastructure. Farmers on more than 40 acres are not subject to zoning, subdivision, and building regulations.

There is a strong desire from many individuals and groups in the county to change the interpretation of the agricultural exemption to focus more on use than on farm size. There are concerns that a broadly interpreted exemption could lead to unchecked residential sprawl, as well as the expansion of more intense agricultural uses on to smaller parcels, potentially closer to residential areas.

## **RURAL & AGRICULTURAL TOURISM**

Rural and agricultural tourism, or agritourism, allows farm owners or operators to generate supplemental income by bringing visitors to a property to experience a working farm or other rural agricultural use. Agritourism can include farm stands or shops, self-pick orchards, farm stays, tours, on-farm classes, fairs, festivals, orchards, pumpkin patches, corn mazes, Christmas tree farms, wineries, youth camps, hunting or fishing, and more. Typically the intensity of these uses are more commercial in nature than traditional agriculture, and can present planning challenges by increasing traffic in areas not traditionally accustomed to accommodate it. Johnson County currently has several agritourism businesses operating under home business or other commercial permits, and serving local residents and visitors alike. There has been increased interest from other property owners whose operations are in parts of the county where current regulations do not support commercial or other high-intensity uses. The desire to expand Johnson County's tourism industry by capitalizing on rural properties and uses requires careful consideration in regulating those uses to ensure that the additional strain on rural infrastructure can be addressed in a way that adequately protects the interests of surrounding land owners and the health and safety of the general public.



[section 1.6]

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Prior to developing a comprehensive plan, it is important to understand where the county is today and where it has been. Developing a demographic profile helps to make future projections and allows better planning. At the beginning of each chapter, there is a profile about that specific topic. A full demographic profile, including population projections, is contained in Appendix A. The following is a summary of that profile:

- Johnson County’s population is growing at the second-highest rate in the state and has experienced growth of 10% or more each decade since 1920.
- The population grew by 10.2% during the five-year period between 2010 and 2015, reaching 144,215 in 2015.
- In 2010, 16.4% (21,438) of the total county population lived in the unincorporated areas.
- The population in the unincorporated portion of the county has grown more modestly (63.5% growth in 1970–2010) than the incorporated areas have (85.5% growth in 1970–2010).
- The unincorporated area has, in general, an older population than the incorporated areas. Using 2015 American Community Survey data, 57.5% of the unincorporated population was born between 1940 and 1980, while 38% of the total county population falls into this age group.
- 94.8% of the total Johnson County population has a high school diploma or higher degree (Iowa: 91.5%) and 51.4% of the population has a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Iowa: 26.7%).
- Johnson County’s median household income of \$55,700 is slightly higher than the state average of \$53,183.
- 32.4% of Johnson County households make less than \$35,000 annually, while 24.9% make more than \$100,000 annually.
- Three different population projections estimate that Johnson County will continue to grow consistently, reaching between 200,000 and 220,000 people by 2040.

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