

MAY 2026

Revitalizing Downtown Elm Springs

CNU 34 Legacy Project



Acknowledgments

This report was prepared as part of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) 34 Legacy Project for the City of Elm Springs, Arkansas. It is intended to provide a long-term vision and clear first steps toward implementation that will help stimulate the revitalization of Downtown Elm Springs.

This opportunity was made possible through the Congress for the New Urbanism and its member firms, who provide pro bono technical assistance to communities in conjunction with CNU's annual Congress. The Downtown Elm Springs Legacy Project was initiated by the City of Elm Springs and advanced through collaboration with local stakeholders, with guidance from CNU staff and the selected multidisciplinary design team.

Selected as a Legacy Project in coordination with CNU 34, this effort reflects the commitment of local leadership, community members, and national experts to create a shared, implementable vision for a more connected, vibrant, and resilient downtown Elm Springs.

Prepared For

City of Elm Springs, Arkansas

Sponsor

Congress for the New Urbanism

Local Partners

KMS ESTS CDC LLC

Elm Springs United Methodist Church

A special thank you to all of the residents and city leadership of Elm Springs who participated in the Charrette. And to the Northwest Arkansas Host Committee for organizing the Legacy Projects for CNU 34.



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Executive Summary



Project Overview

In March 2026, the City of Elm Springs partnered with the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) through its annual Legacy Project program to envision a revitalized downtown that strengthens local identity, supports responsible growth, and anchors civic life. Elm Springs was selected as one of four Legacy communities for CNU 34, receiving pro-bono technical assistance from a multidisciplinary planning and design team led by TSW, with J Griffin Design, LLC, national CNU staff, and support from Zimmerman Volk and Associates. for a housing study and regional demographic info provided by DPZ.

Over a three-day community design charrette, the team worked closely with city leadership, appointed officials, stakeholders, and residents to develop a clear, actionable framework for transforming a 58-acre area along Highway 112 into a walkable, mixed-use town center. The resulting Downtown Vision Plan establishes a coherent structure for civic space, neighborhoods, streets, and development that reflects Elm Springs' small-town character while positioning the city to thrive within the rapidly growing Northwest Arkansas region.

Context & Opportunity

Elm Springs is a small but growing community located along AR Highway 112, midway between Fayetteville and Bentonville and approximately 10 minutes from Northwest Arkansas National Airport. Though surrounded by larger neighboring municipalities, Elm Springs remains defined by low-density residential patterns and limited commercial services. As regional growth accelerates, city leaders and residents recognize that a distinct, well-designed downtown is essential to maintaining community identity, economic resilience, and quality of life.

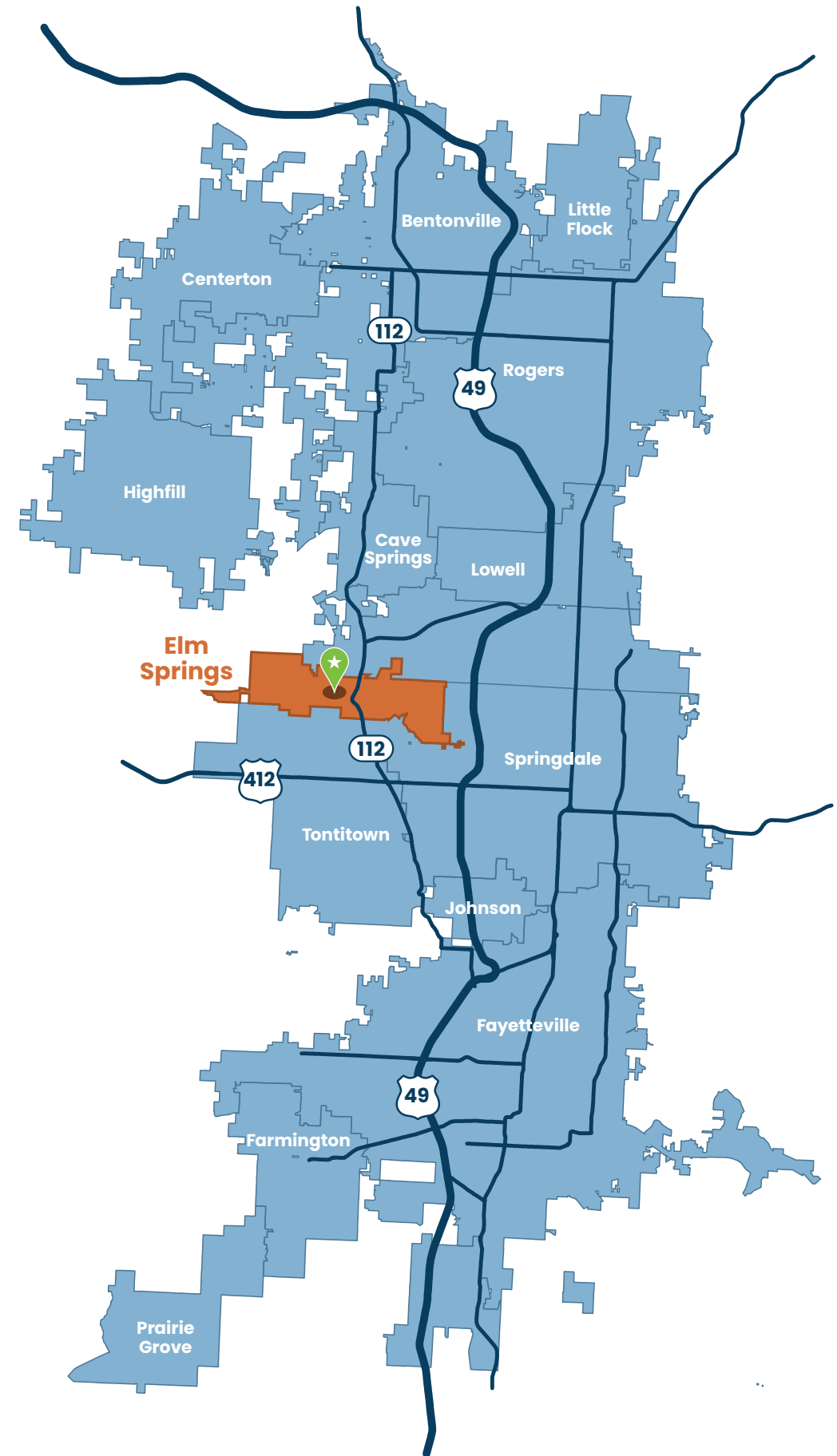
Planned improvements to Highway 112 including roadway widening and a regional sidepath, create both challenges and opportunities. While the corridor currently functions as a high-speed thoroughfare, its central location and visibility offer the potential to evolve into a place of arrival, activity, and civic presence rather than a boundary or barrier.

Vision

The Downtown Vision Plan establishes a long-term framework for a compact, connected, and welcoming town center that serves as the heart of Elm Springs. The plan envisions downtown as:

- A civic anchor for the city, centered around a new City Hall and public commons
- A walkable mixed-use district with neighborhood-serving retail, offices, and diverse housing types
- A place that balances local character with growth, providing services and gathering spaces for residents while remaining adaptable over time
- A model for context-sensitive development aligned with New Urbanist principles and CNU's regional Transect focus

The plan is structured to support incremental development, early catalytic investments, and coordinated public-private action.



Executive Summary

Planning & Design Framework

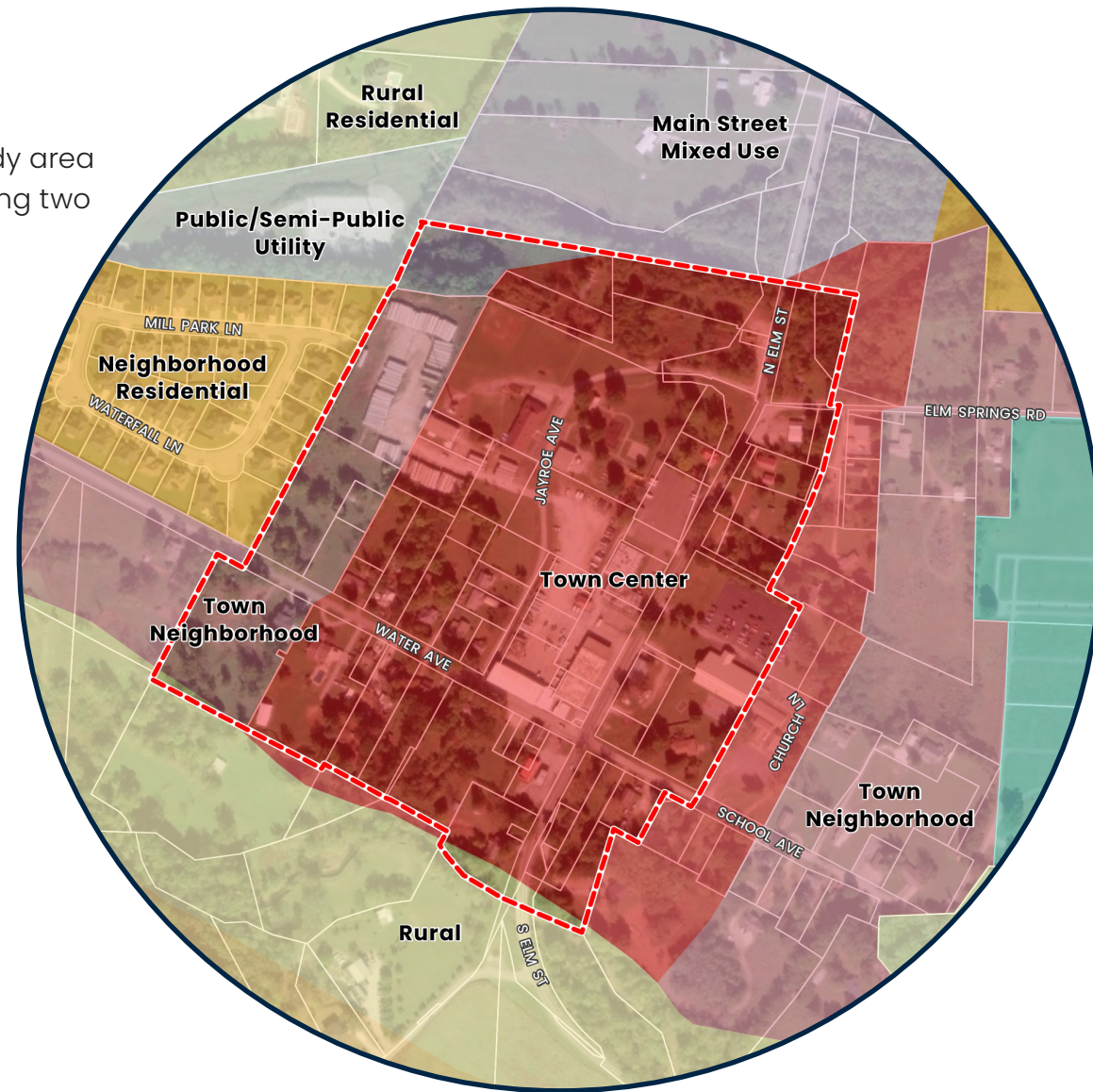
The Downtown Vision Plan organizes the 58-acre study area into a coherent civic and neighborhood structure using two future land use designations established by the City:

Town Center (TC)

Functioning as the central core of the community, this land use category supports development that: advances walkability and connectivity; provides public gathering/open space, encourages vibrant retail and community services; promotes diverse housing options that support local businesses and strengthen the sense of community; support local identity, resilience, and economics.

Town Neighborhood (TN)

TN features a variety of housing types and small-scale neighborhood businesses, with an overall focus on pedestrian connectivity and access to amenities. Specifically envisioned to support Town Center, TN is urban in form with build-to zones, and design standards are utilized to promote compatibility between uses and to support the small-town character of Elm Springs.



Future Land Use Categories

Civic/Institution	Public / Semi-Public Utility
Conservation Subdivision/ Pocket Neighborhood	Rural
Low Density Subdivision	Rural Residential
Main Street Mixed Use	Town Center
Neighborhood Residential	Town Neighborhood

Key framework elements include:

Highway 112 as Main Street

Highway 112 is re-envisioned as Elm Springs' primary civic corridor. While accommodating regional traffic and planned widening, the plan emphasizes street-oriented buildings, frequent connections, and active ground-floor uses. A multi-use sidepath strengthens pedestrian and bicycle connectivity and links downtown to the regional trail network.

Gateways and Traffic Circles

Two planned roundabouts—at Jayroe Avenue to the north and Water Avenue to the south—define downtown gateways, slow traffic, and create prominent locations for civic and mixed-use buildings. These gateways establish a clear sense of arrival and frame the heart of town.

Civic Commons and Anchors

A central public commons between the two gateways forms the social heart of downtown. This flexible green space is framed by mixed-use buildings and civic uses, including a new City Hall positioned as a landmark at the northern gateway. The plan also respectfully integrates the existing Elm Springs United Methodist Church as part of the civic fabric.

Streets, Blocks, and Neighborhoods

A fine-grained network of interconnected streets supports walkability, disperses traffic, and creates development blocks of a human scale. Residential areas include a range of housing types—single-family homes, cottages, townhomes, and small apartment buildings—supported by small neighborhood parks and shared open spaces.

Catalytic and Incremental Development

The plan identifies early opportunities for adaptive reuse and small-scale projects, including the potential transformation of an existing building near Highway 112 and Water Avenue into a restaurant or retail destination. These catalytic efforts can build momentum while larger investments follow.

Executive Summary

The Charrette Process

The Downtown Vision Plan emerged from an intensive, collaborative planning process grounded in CNU’s Legacy Project model. Prior to the charrette, the design team conducted stakeholder interviews and reviewed local and regional conditions. During the three-day workshop, the team toured the site with community members, tested alternative concepts in real time, and refined the plan through daily public feedback.

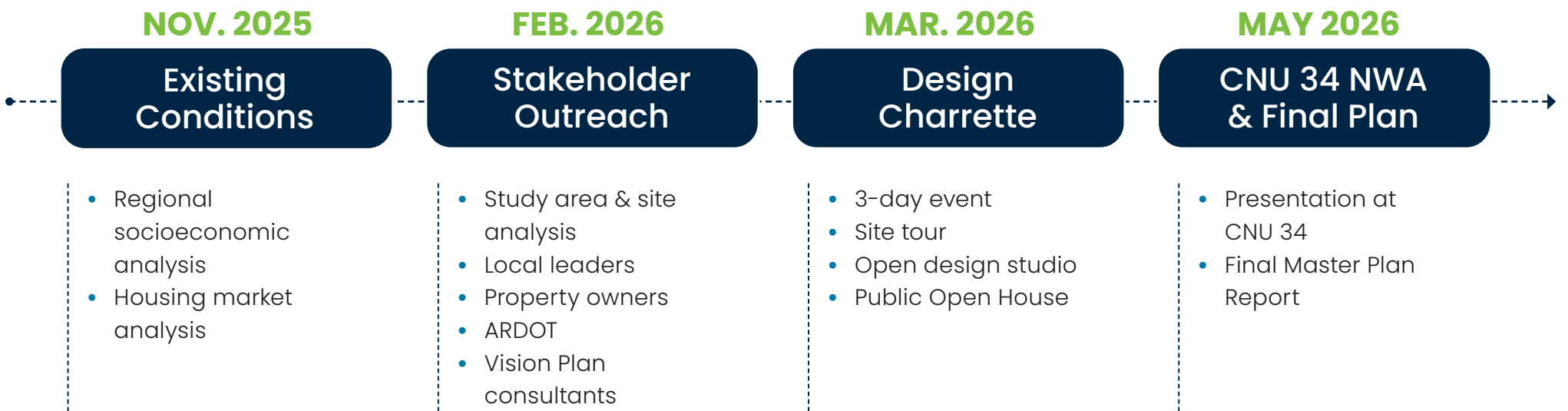
The charrette process was led by Katy O’Meilia (TSW), planning and engagement efforts were led by Jill Ferenc and Daniel Sperle. Design team members included Thomas Walsh, Adam Williamson, and Jen Griffin. National CNU staff and local host committee members participated throughout, reinforcing the project’s alignment with New Urbanist principles and the CNU 34 regional focus.

Outcomes & Next Steps

The plan is intended to guide early steps toward implementation through incremental development, policy alignment, and continued community leadership. As presented at CNU 34, Elm Springs’ Legacy Project demonstrates how thoughtful planning and design can help small communities shape growth, reinforce identity, and build enduring places at the heart of their cities.

The Downtown Vision Plan provides Elm Springs with:

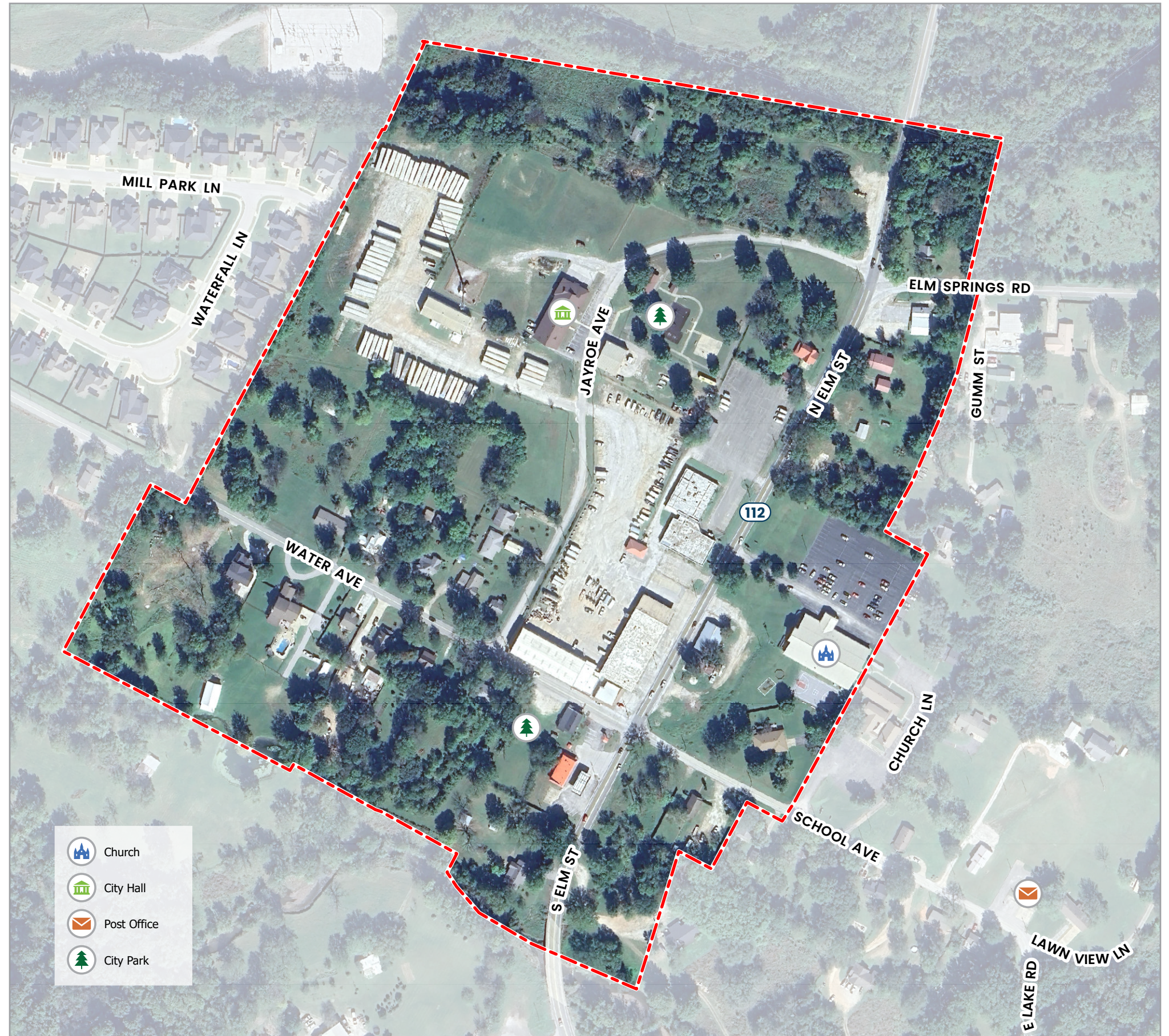
- A clear, illustrative downtown redevelopment framework
- A shared vision grounded in community priorities
- Guidance for short-term actions and long-term growth
- A foundation for future zoning, infrastructure investments, and public-private partnerships



Existing Conditions

Downtown Elm Springs serves as the historic and civic core of the community, located at the intersection of local roadways and surrounded by primarily residential and semi-rural development patterns. The project area is centered along Elm Street and Water Avenue, where small-scale commercial uses, civic facilities, and institutional anchors are concentrated. While the downtown retains a traditional small-town form, characterized by modest building footprints and a linear commercial corridor, it is influenced by surrounding low-density residential neighborhoods and agricultural areas.

The area functions as a local service center anchored by City Hall and the Elm Springs United Methodist Church. Its location within the broader Northwest Arkansas region positions it within a growing market area, though the downtown itself remains relatively low intensity in terms of development and infrastructure. This context presents both challenges and opportunities, including the need to enhance infrastructure and connectivity while preserving the community's small-town character as growth pressures continue to expand outward from nearby urban centers.



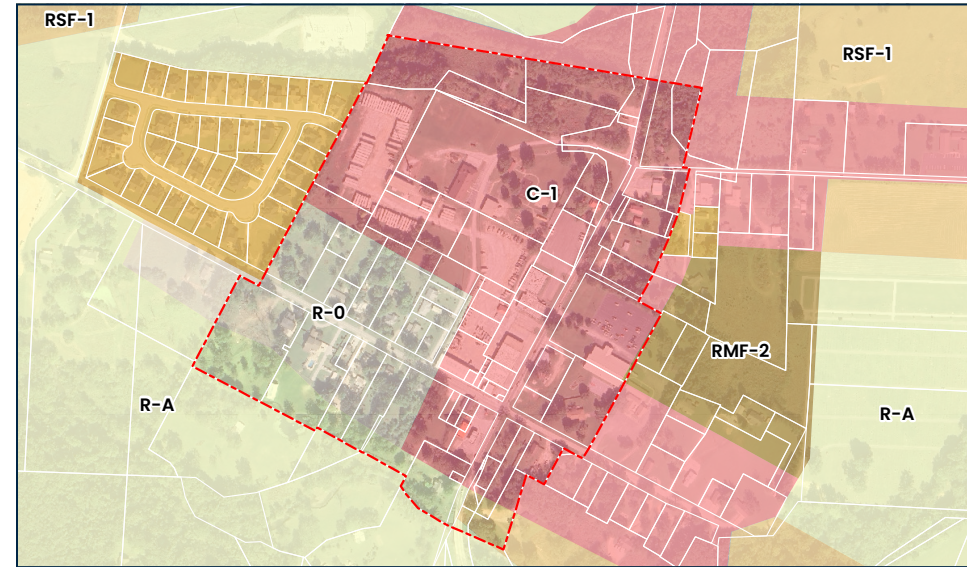
Existing Conditions

The project team documented and evaluated existing physical conditions, including land use patterns, development form, transportation systems, and the public realm, supported by review of available plans and baseline data.

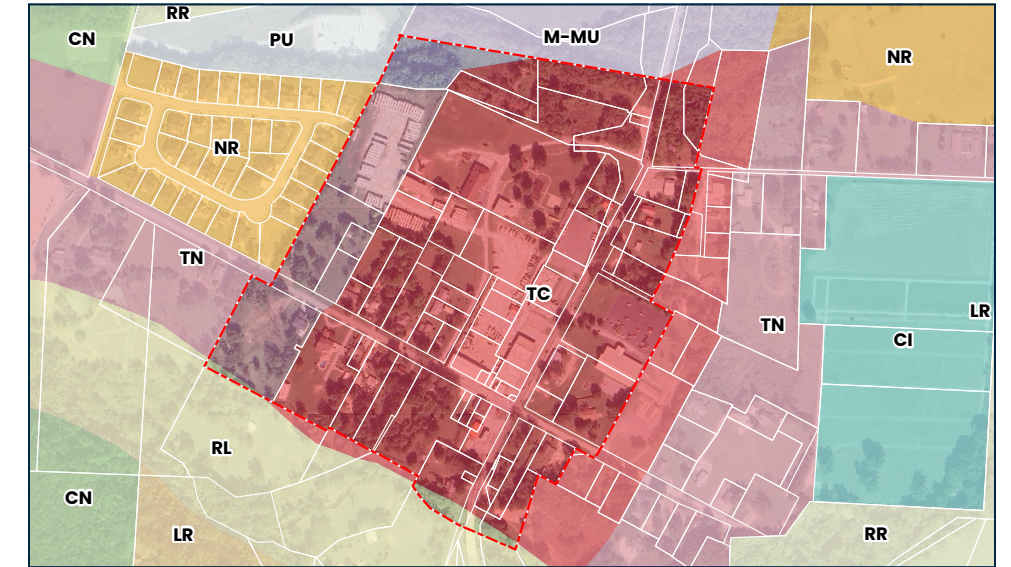
The analysis incorporated regional demographic and market data, including residential market potential, and target market segmentation analysis. These sources provided insight into household characteristics, market demand, and socioeconomic trends influencing growth in Elm Springs and the surrounding region.

Key Observations:

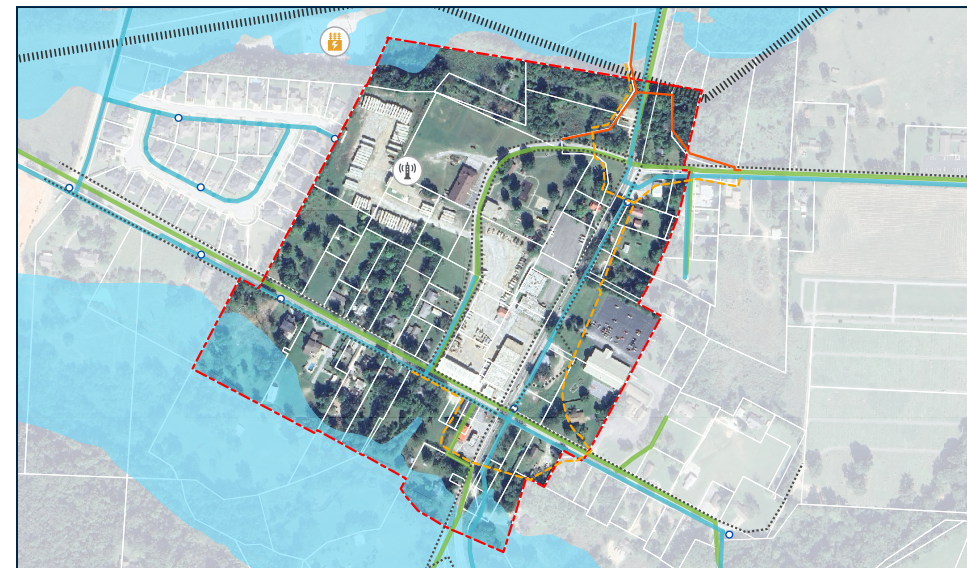
- Downtown is adequately served by water and electrical infrastructure.
- Sewer system relies on septic tanks pumped and transported to a regional treatment facility.
- A small portion of the southern edge of downtown lies within the floodplain.
- Existing streets lack curb and gutter infrastructure, limiting formal stormwater management.
- Property ownership within downtown is concentrated among a few key entities. KMS ESTS CDC LLC is the largest landowner, holding approximately 14.67 acres.
- Elm Springs United Methodist Church is the second largest property owner, with approximately 7.1 acres east of Elm Street and north of School Avenue.
- The City of Elm Springs owns approximately 6.56 acres, including a small frontage along Water Avenue west of Elm Street and a larger tract north of the project area where City Hall is located.



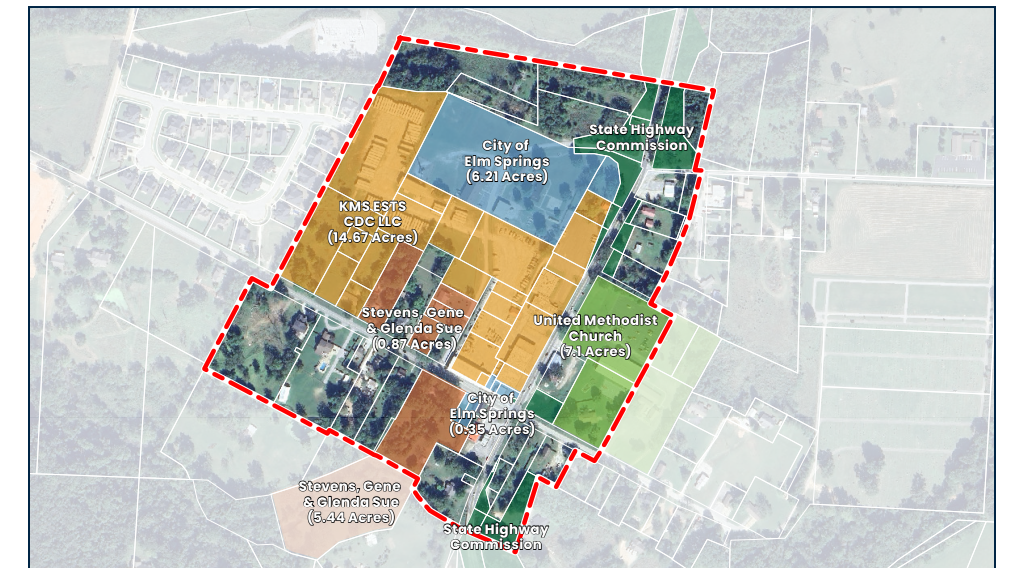
Map of Existing Zoning



Map of Future Land Use



Map of Utility Infrastructure & Floodplain



Map of Primary Land Owners

Existing Site Conditions



Looking north on Highway 112



Looking south on Highway 112



Looking east from Highway 112 towards Elm Springs United Methodist Church



Looking northwest from Highway 112 south of Water Ave



Looking west at intersection of Water Ave & Highway 112



Looking west from Highway 112 south of Water Ave



Looking north from Jayroe St towards City Hall



Looking west at intersection of Water Ave & Jayroe St

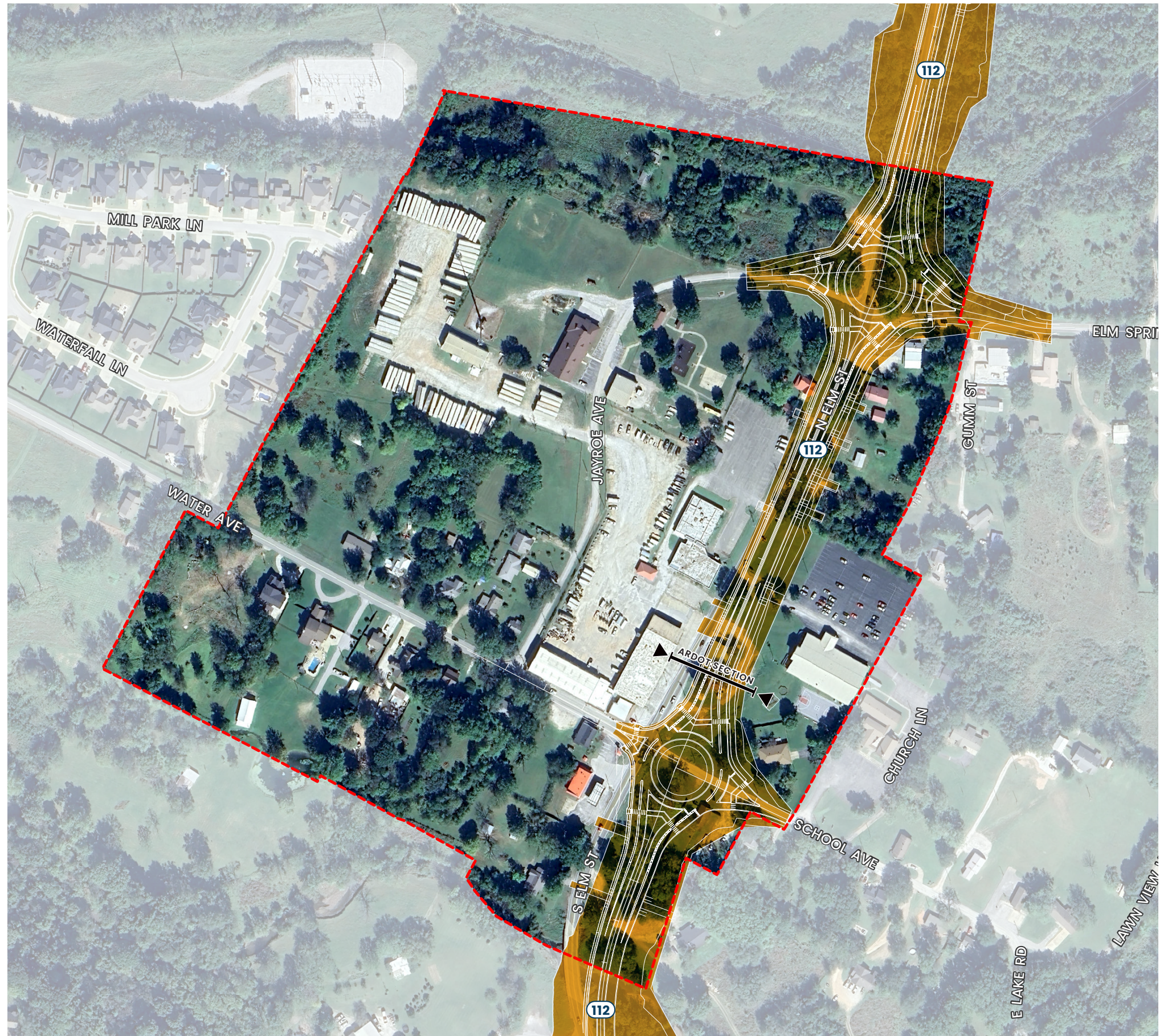
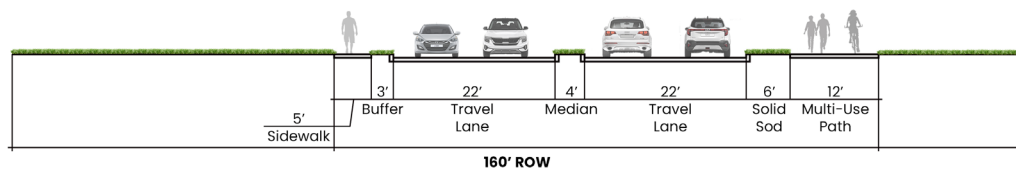


Looking east from City Hall at Elm Springs City Park

HWY 112 Planned Improvements

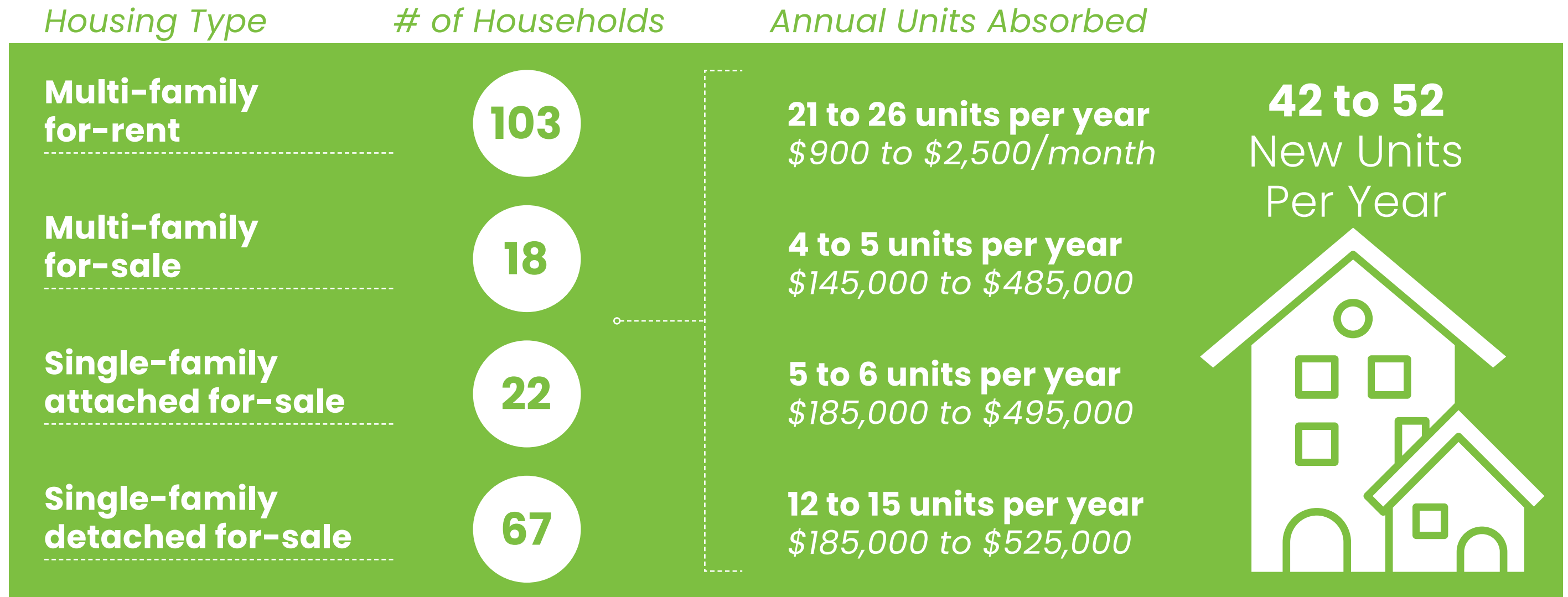
Highway 112 (Elm Street) is the primary corridor through downtown Elm Springs and is currently undergoing significant reconstruction by ARDOT, including conversion to a four-lane boulevard with roundabouts and a regional sidepath. At the time of this plan, the project is in an advanced stage of design and engineering, with key elements such as right-of-way, access control, driveway locations, and roadway geometry largely finalized, limiting the ability for substantial modifications. As a result, the corridor establishes a fixed framework that the downtown redevelopment plan must work within. While these constraints restrict major changes, the project also introduces opportunities to support downtown revitalization through improved connectivity and multimodal access. However, streetscape elements such as street trees, enhanced lighting, and placemaking features are not currently included, highlighting the need for coordinated local enhancements to create a more cohesive and pedestrian-oriented downtown environment.

Current ARDOT Cross Section Design



Downtown Housing Market Analysis

Annual Market Capture for Downtown Elm Springs Households Above 60% AMI



As determined by HUD, an annual income of 60 percent of the AMI starts at \$42,800 for a single-person household and starts at \$66,000 for a five-person household.

What We Heard

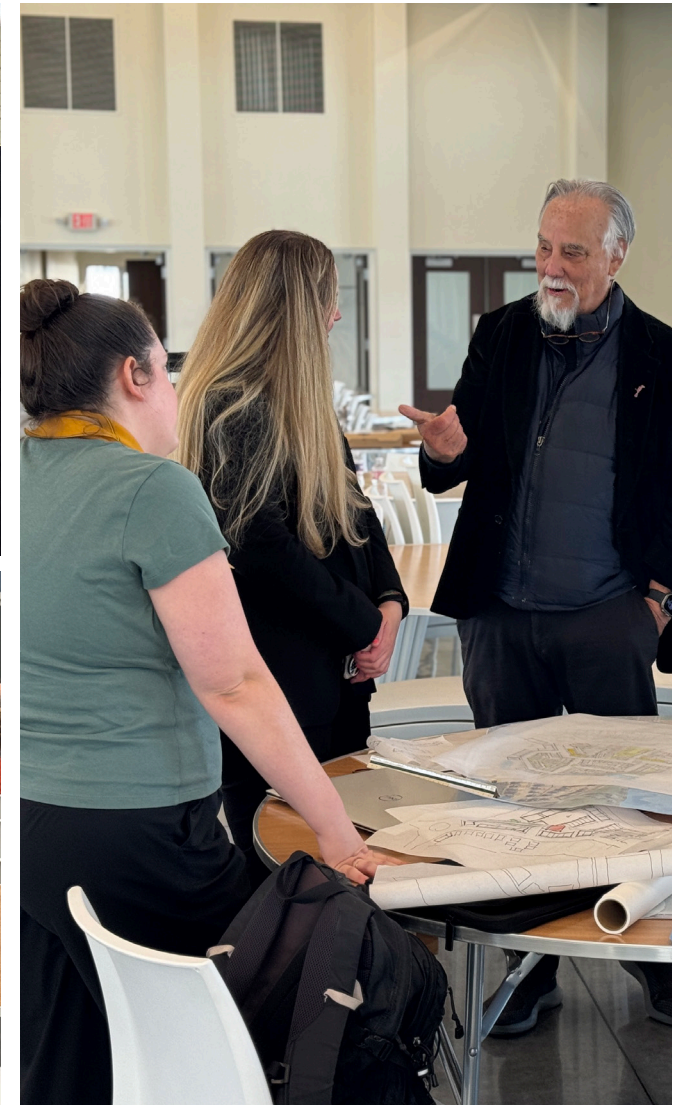
Stakeholder input from City leadership, residents, and business owners was integrated through interviews, public sessions, and open studio work. The community outreach helped identify key issues, constraints, and opportunities, establishing a clear foundation for subsequent visioning and redevelopment strategies.

Common Themes:

- Build a true mixed-use downtown beyond the highway corridor
- Make downtown safe, walkable, & welcoming
- Create vibrant places for gathering & community life
- Support local businesses & diverse housing
- Guide growth to protect Elm Springs' character
- Coordinate public & private investment for long-term success

Stakeholder Interviews

- **City of Elm Springs**
(Staff & Planning Commission)
- **ARDOT**
(Hwy 112 Project Team)
- **Kimbel Plumbing**
(Downtown Landowner)
- **Elm Springs United Methodist Church**
(Downtown Landowner)
- **Blackbird Coffee Roasters**
(Downtown Landowner)
- **Plymouth Engineering**
(City Engineer Consultant)



Guiding Principles



Strengthen Community Identity

Reinforce Elm Springs' small-town character by creating a distinct downtown that reflects local history, culture, and values. The plan prioritizes civic anchors, recognizable gateways, and human-scaled development to establish a strong sense of place that residents can identify with and take pride in.



Provide Diverse, Contextual Housing Solutions

Expand housing options to meet evolving community needs while maintaining compatibility with existing neighborhoods. A mix of housing types, including cottages, townhomes, and small multifamily, supports affordability, aging in place, and incremental growth.



Create a Walkable, Connected Downtown

Design a compact, interconnected network of streets, blocks, and public spaces that prioritize pedestrians and cyclists. This principle responds directly to community input by making downtown safe, accessible, and easy to navigate, while integrating Highway 112 into a more complete and connected street environment.



Design a Safe & Inviting Public Realm

Create high-quality public spaces that encourage gathering, recreation, and everyday social interaction. Emphasis on streetscape design, lighting, green space, and active frontages ensures downtown feels welcoming, comfortable, and active throughout the day.



Bolster Local Economy & Economic Resilience

Support local businesses and attract new investment through a vibrant mixed-use environment. By creating opportunities for retail, services, and small-scale employment, the plan helps diversify the local economy and build long-term economic stability.



Plan for Purposeful & Sustainable Growth

Guide future development in a coordinated, intentional manner that aligns with community values. The plan promotes efficient land use, supports infrastructure investments, and ensures that growth enhances Elm Springs' character and quality of life.

Downtown Concept



Catalytic Project Perspective



Community Green Space Perspective

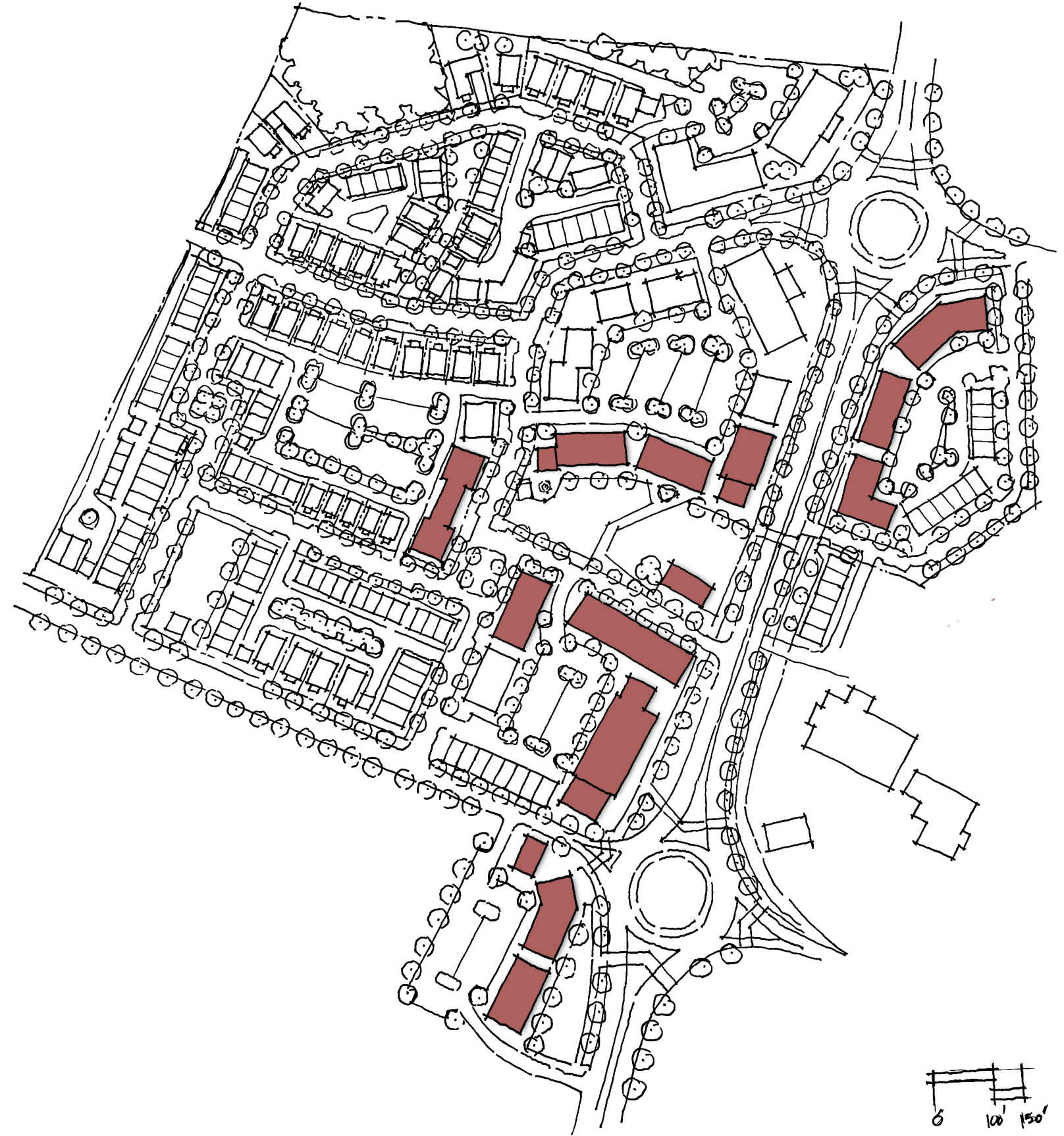


Community Greenspace



Community green space is envisioned as both essential civic infrastructure and a catalyst for economic and social activity, anchored by a central, programmable green that supports events, markets, and daily use. This primary space should be highly visible and directly connected to surrounding streets and businesses to reinforce downtown identity and vitality. A network of smaller green spaces, including neighborhood commons, green streets, and naturalized areas, will extend access and usability throughout the plan area. These spaces should be designed to integrate stormwater management functions such as detention and retention, while improving water quality and environmental performance. Collectively, this system strengthens the public realm, enhances resilience, and supports a walkable and connected downtown environment.

Commercial & Mixed-Use

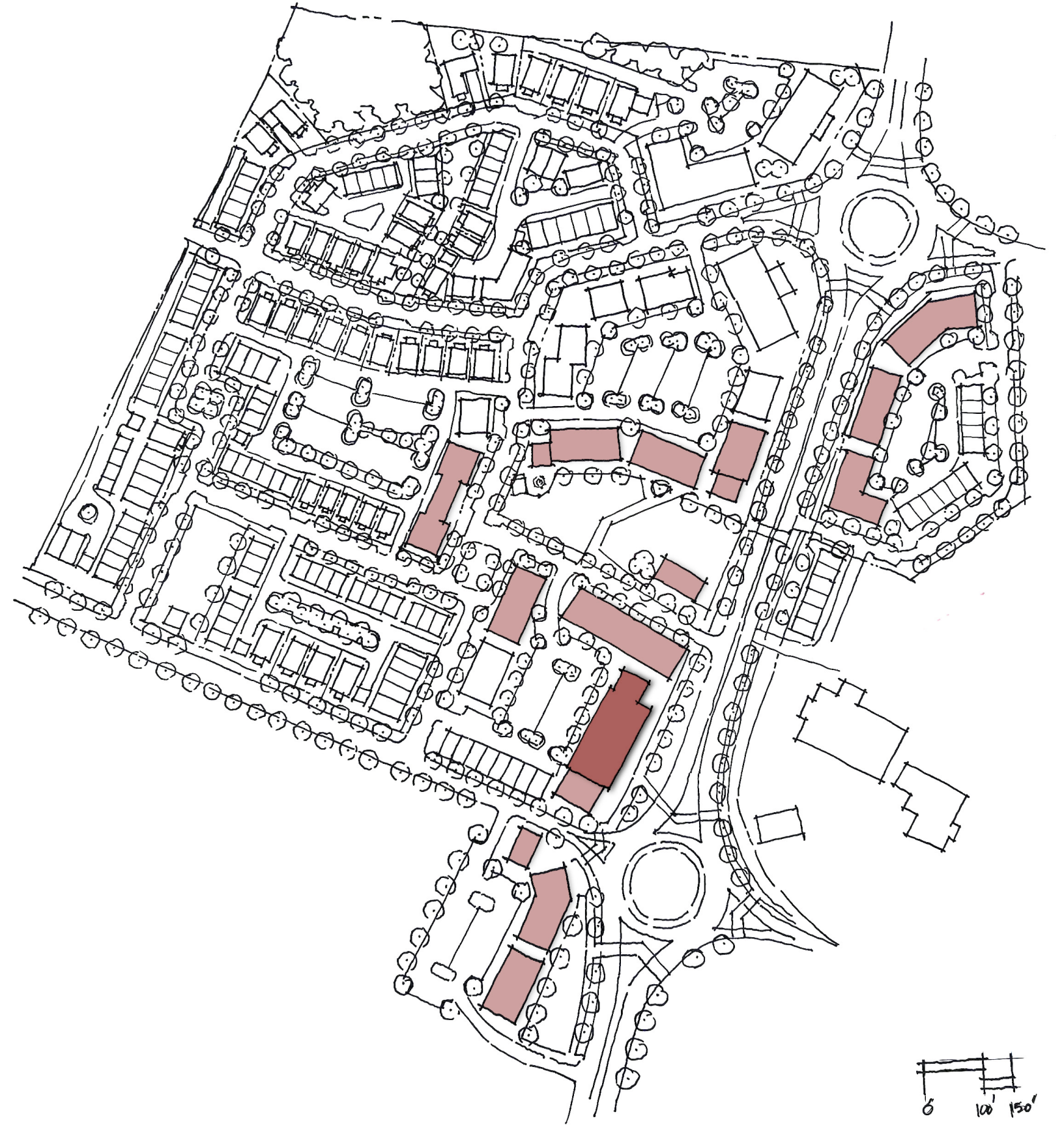


Commercial and mixed-use development will form a compact and walkable downtown core centered on small scale, locally oriented businesses. Ground floor uses should prioritize restaurants, cafés, retail, and neighborhood services that activate the public realm and encourage pedestrian activity. Upper story residential or office uses should be incorporated to support sustained activity and efficient land use. Building form should be human scaled with consistent frontages, minimal setbacks, and direct engagement with the street to create a cohesive and inviting environment. This development pattern supports local economic resilience while establishing a distinctive destination that serves both residents and the broader region

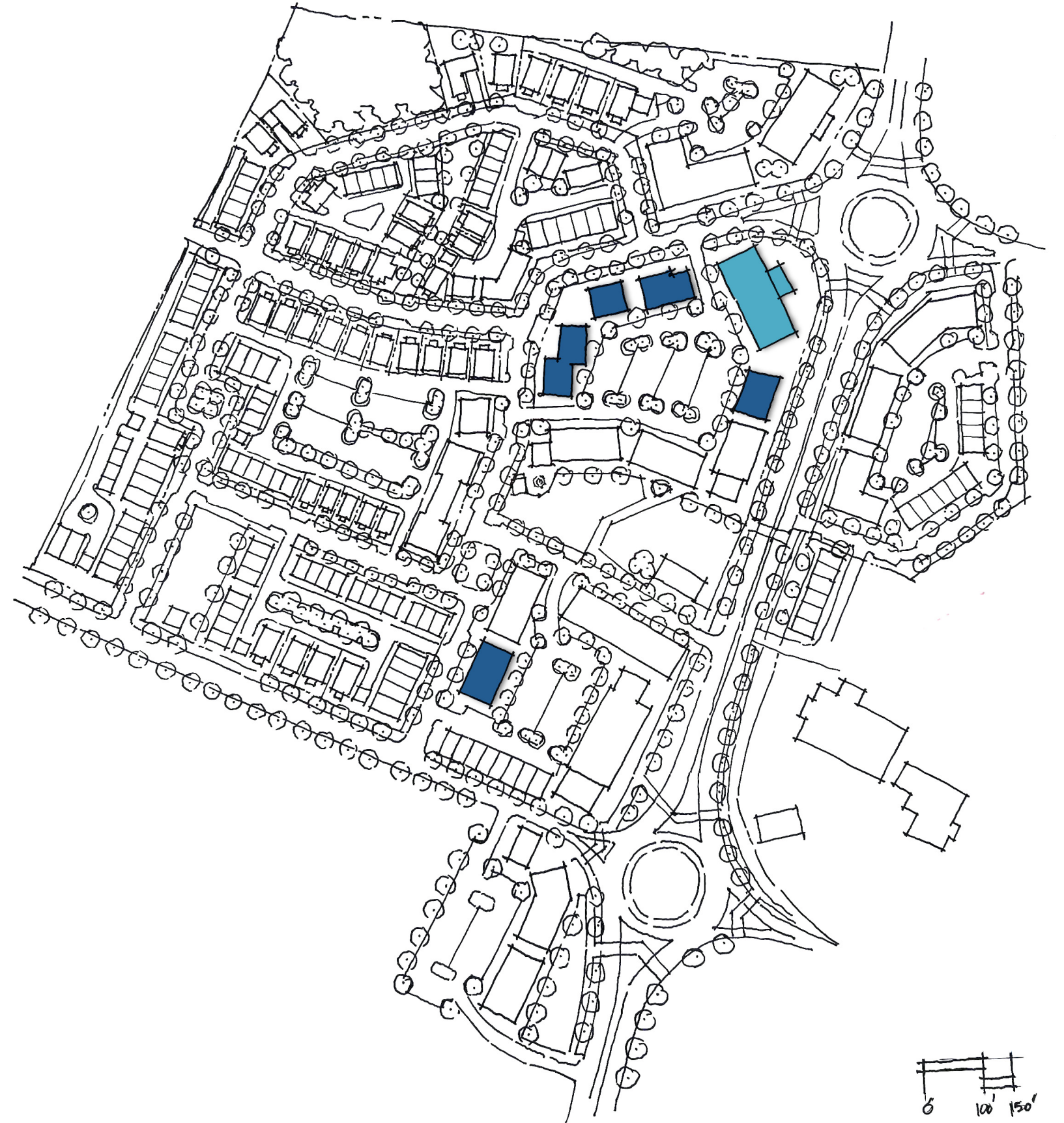
Adaptive Reuse



The Grove at Monday Night Brewing repurposes an industrial warehouse into a vibrant brewery and community hub along Atlanta's BeltLine. Its design integrates 17,000 square feet of activated outdoor space, featuring terraced seating, event areas, and preserved tree canopy, extending the experience into the public realm. Located on the BeltLine's Northwest Trail, it strengthens pedestrian connectivity and serves as a key node within an expanding network of parks and trails. As a destination anchor, it has increased visitation, fostered a strong sense of place, and catalyzed adjacent mixed-use development. Collectively, the project demonstrates how adaptive reuse and placemaking can leverage public infrastructure to drive private investment and shape walkable mixed-use districts.

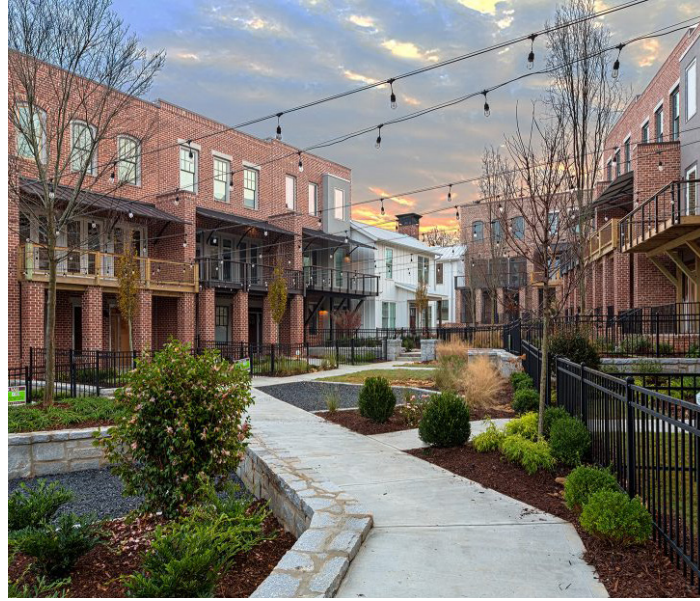


Civic & Office



Civic uses will serve as prominent anchors within the downtown, establishing a strong sense of identity and place. A new Town Hall should be located at a key northern gateway and designed as a visible and accessible civic landmark, consolidating municipal services into a central location. Civic buildings should be carefully sited to frame public spaces and contribute to the overall quality of the public realm. The inclusion of small-scale office and co-working spaces within the mixed-use core will support local employment opportunities and increase daytime activity. Together, these uses reinforce downtown as the functional and symbolic heart of the community.

Residential



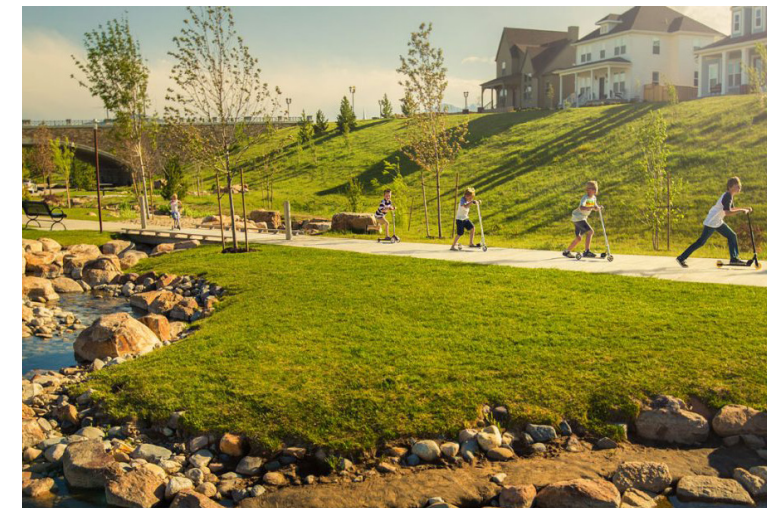
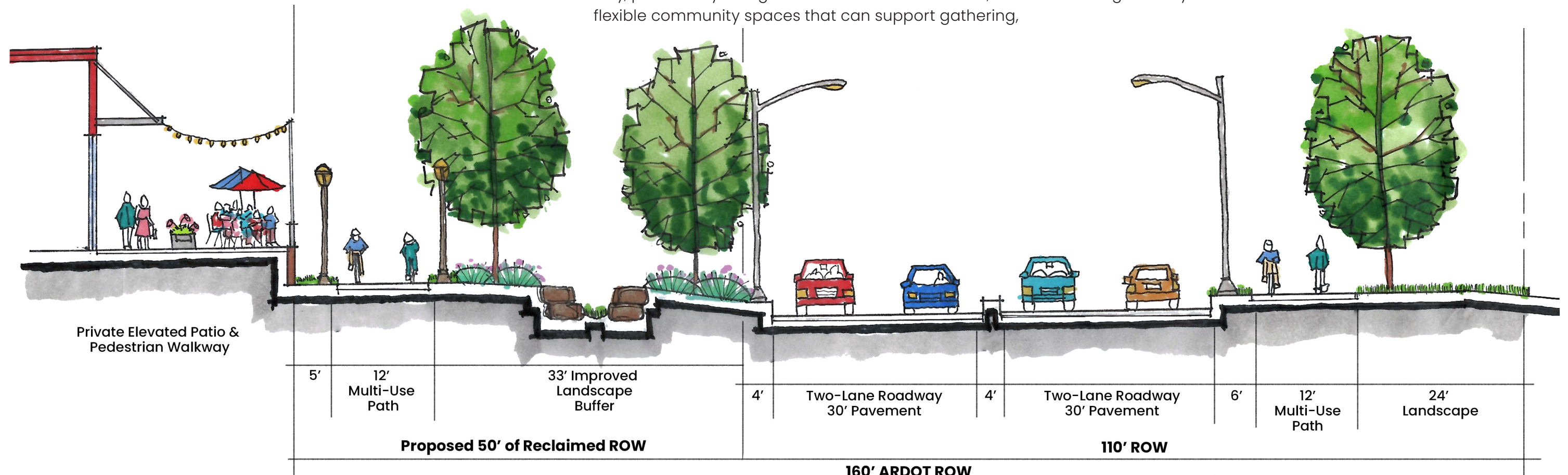
A diverse mix of housing types is critical to supporting long term community vitality and maintaining compatibility with existing neighborhoods. The plan encourages a range of options including cottages, townhomes, accessory dwelling units, and small multifamily buildings to serve varying income levels and life stages. Residential development should be concentrated near the downtown core to support walkability, local businesses, and efficient infrastructure use. This approach enables aging in place, improves affordability, and directs growth inward to preserve surrounding rural landscapes. Detailed market recommendations are provided in the ZVA analysis included in the appendix to ensure alignment with local demand and feasibility.

Highway 112 Proposed Streetscape

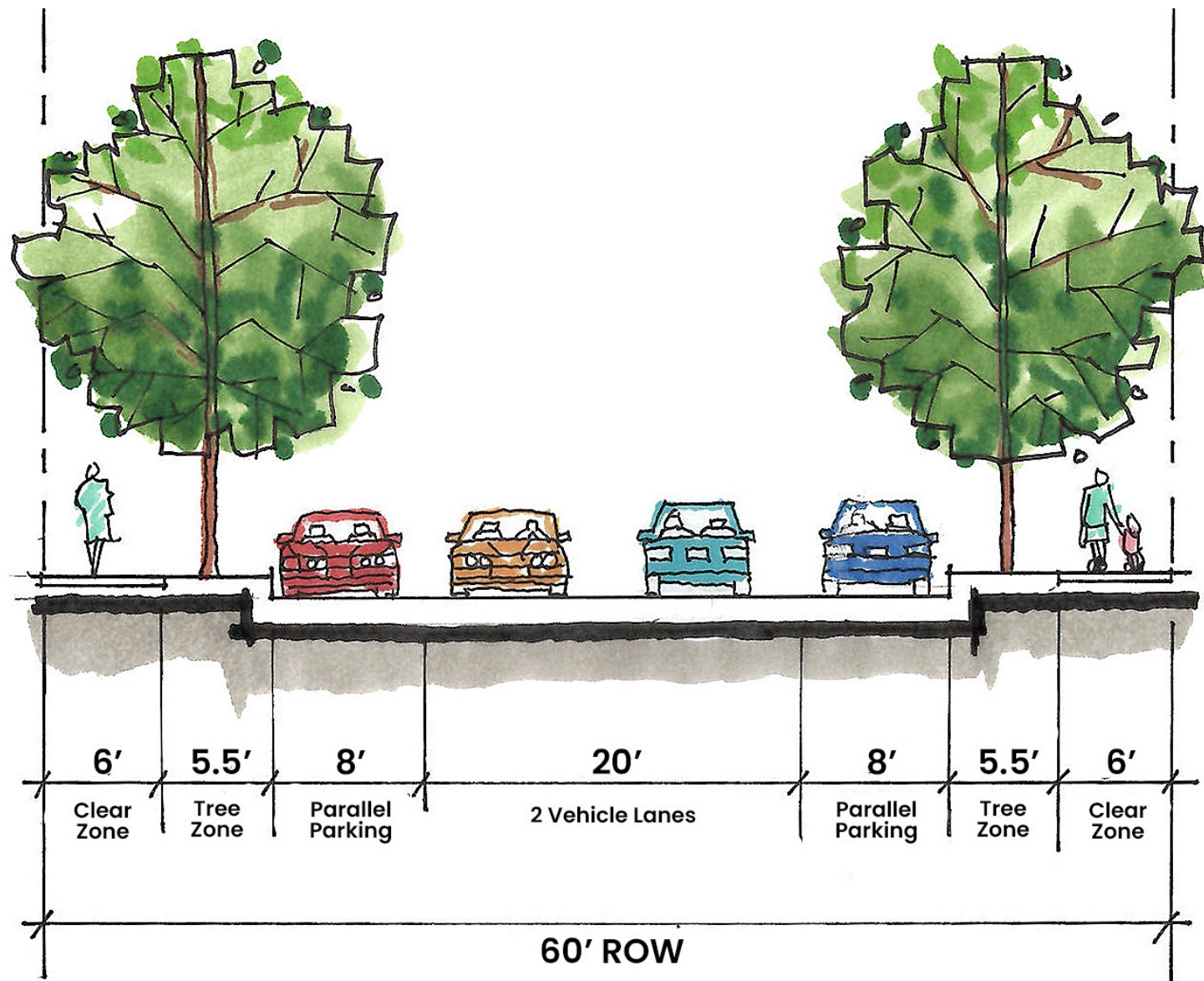
Highway 112 is a defining corridor and must evolve from a regional thoroughfare into a context-sensitive main street that supports a safe, walkable, and connected downtown. The City should initiate formal coordination with ARDOT to refine the planned roadway improvements, so they better align with the community vision.

Key refinements should include reclaiming surplus right of way, particularly along the west side of the corridor, to create flexible community spaces that can support gathering,

events, and green infrastructure. Streetscape enhancements such as street trees, pedestrian-scale lighting, and consistent landscape treatments should be incorporated to improve comfort, safety, and visual quality. In addition, the pedestrian path on the west side of Highway 112 should be widened and designed as an active frontage, establishing a “trail-oriented” downtown edge that supports adjacent mixed-use development and strengthens connections to the regional greenway network.



Residential Street



Residential streets play a critical role in establishing the overall character and quality of the built environment, setting the tone for how neighborhoods feel, function, and evolve over time. These streets should be designed as calm, low-speed environments that prioritize pedestrians, cyclists, and neighborhood interaction while still accommodating local vehicle access. A well-proportioned streetscape that includes street trees, on-street parking, sidewalks, and modest building setbacks creates a comfortable and human-scaled setting. Building frontages should orient toward the street, with entries, porches, and windows contributing to a sense of activity and safety. Collectively, residential streets reinforce Elm Springs' small-town character and support a cohesive, walkable pattern of development that aligns with the community's long-term vision.



Strategic Recommendations & Next Steps

These strategic actions establish a clear, phased implementation framework grounded in infrastructure readiness, regulatory alignment, catalytic development, and placemaking. Collectively, they position Elm Springs to realize its vision of a walkable, vibrant, and locally distinctive downtown that strengthens community identity while supporting sustainable growth.

<p>Immediate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit request and coordinate with ARDOT to refine Hwy 112 improvement plans to align with the community vision. • Establish a Downtown Elm Springs task force to focus on leading the next steps. • Actively promote and communicate the vision for Downtown Elm Springs to build momentum and attract investment.
<p>Short-Term</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update development regulations to align with the downtown plan vision. • Prioritize establishing public sanitary sewer infrastructure in downtown.
<p>Mid-Term</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure a public-private partnership for a catalyst residential project. • Explore incentives for catalytic commercial development. • Develop schematic plans for a new City Hall facility. • Plan and implement a central community green space.

Strategic Recommendations & Next Steps

Immediate

Submit request and coordinate with ARDOT to refine Hwy 112 improvement plans to align with the community vision.

Work collaboratively with ARDOT as soon as possible to review roadway sections, intersection design, and pedestrian crossings and submit a request to refine plans to better support a walkable downtown environment. Focus on refining elements such as:

- Reclaiming surplus ARDOT right-of-way on the west side of the road as community space
- Integrating beautification elements, like trees and pedestrian lighting
- Incorporating landscape buffers between the highway and the pedestrian paths for safety and comfort.
- Widening the pedestrian path on the west side of Hwy 112, increasing the buffer between the highway, and creating an active frontage for the downtown core trail-front concept.

Establish a Downtown Elm Springs task force to focus on leading the next steps.

Create a dedicated, multi-stakeholder task force to champion implementation of the downtown plan, maintain momentum, and coordinate public and private efforts.

- Appoint representatives from City leadership, Planning Commission, major landowners, and community stakeholders.
- Define a clear governance structure, roles, and responsibilities.
- Prepare a phased implementation roadmap prioritizing short-term wins.
- Monitor progress, adjust strategies, and serve as the central decision-making body for downtown initiatives.

Actively promote and communicate the vision for Downtown Elm Springs to build momentum and attract investment.

Develop and implement a strategic communications and marketing effort to build awareness, align stakeholders, and attract targeted investment consistent with the plan vision.

Short-Term

Update development regulations to align with the downtown plan vision.

To achieve the desired character and development pattern for downtown Elm Springs, regulatory tools should clearly translate the vision into predictable, implementable standards. A regulating plan, paired with updated development regulations, provides a coordinated approach to guide both public and private investment, ensuring that individual projects contribute to a cohesive, walkable downtown environment. A regulating plan for the downtown district is recommended to:

- Allow for mixed-use and expanded residential typologies envisioned in the downtown plan
- Regulate the development of streets, blocks, and pedestrian connectivity throughout the downtown.
- Set design standards for features of the built environment that cannot normally be regulated through zoning districts (which apply standards on a property-by-property basis), such as:
 - » Cohesive, context-sensitive architectural style
 - » Streetscape elements, such as lighting, benches, trash receptacles, etc.
 - » Signage and branding system with consistent design, integrated wayfinding, and high-quality materials
 - » Circulation path locations for walking and biking connectivity
 - » Landscape and hardscape materials, screening requirements, etc.
 - » Open space locations and character
 - » Coordinate the development of infrastructure that spans across or along multiple properties

Strategic Recommendations & Next Steps

- Enable a variety of housing types in downtown and adjacent areas, such as cottage courts, townhomes, multiplexes, small-lot single-family residential, residential above commercial
 - » Create pathways for small-scale development with simplified approvals for missing middle housing.

Prioritize establishing public sanitary sewer infrastructure in downtown.

Establish the necessary wastewater infrastructure to support downtown-scale development and enable long-term growth and investment.

- Conduct a feasibility study evaluating system alternatives, costs, and service areas.
- Develop a phased infrastructure plan aligned with projected development patterns.
- Identify funding mechanisms (grants, state/federal programs, local financing tools).
- Explore interim solutions such as clustered or shared systems where appropriate.
- Coordinate infrastructure planning with private development timing and phasing.

Mid-Term

Plan and implement a central community green space.

Establish a central public green as a focal point for community life, events, and daily activity, reinforcing downtown identity while serving as a defining placemaking anchor and destination.

- Identify and secure a centrally located site.
- Develop a concept plan defining layout, programming, and connections to adjacent streets and uses.
- Incorporate flexible design to support events, passive recreation, and civic gatherings.
- Pursue grants, partnerships, and phased funding strategies.
- Integrate the green space with the broader network of streets, trails, and development.

Structure a public-private partnership for a catalyst commercial development.

Develop a targeted incentive strategy to attract early commercial uses that activate downtown and provide essential services.

- Conduct market analysis for Elm Springs to assess supportable development scale and mix, identify priority commercial and tourism-driven uses.
- Evaluate feasible tools such as fee reductions, infrastructure cost-sharing, and expedited permitting.
- Prioritize businesses that contribute to walkability and daily activity (e.g., retail, dining, neighborhood services).
- Tie incentives to design standards and alignment with the downtown vision.
- Consider performance-based incentives tied to project delivery and occupancy.
- Establish clear criteria to ensure fiscal responsibility and strategic impact.

Explore incentives for catalytic residential development.

Partner with key landowners to deliver an initial “catalytic” residential development that demonstrates the downtown vision and establishes a market for walkable, mixed-use living.

- Identify priority sites and willing landowners within the downtown core.
- Prepare a development agreement outlining roles, expectations, and public contributions.
- Utilize City-owned land or strategic incentives to reduce development risk.

Strategic Recommendations & Next Steps

- Target “missing middle” housing types aligned with the Town Center and Town Neighborhood framework.
- Phase development to build momentum and market confidence.

Develop schematic plans for a new City Hall facility.

Advance planning for a new City Hall facility that allows for municipal growth and serves as a civic anchor and reinforces downtown identity.

- Evaluate proposed site within the master plan to determine feasibility based on sizing and parking needs.
- Prepare schematic designs for space programming needs, civic prominence and compatibility with surrounding development.
- Integrate public gathering space and potential co-located community functions.
- Identify funding strategies and potential phasing for construction.
- Coordinate with broader downtown design and public realm improvements.

