

Chapter Four: Current and Emerging Issues

Chapter Four explains the nature and extent of the current and emerging issues facing Litchfield. This inventory of issues, however, is not intended to remain constant over the next 20 years. Some of these issues may become lower in priority as planning measures are taken by the City to address them. Additional issues will also arise that should be added to the list as they emerge.

A key element to a comprehensive plan is being able to address the current and emerging issues of the City. The issues facing Litchfield now, and in the future, will largely dictate the development that will occur and the planning that will need to take place. Although many of the following issues were identified throughout the comprehensive planning process, several public meetings were held in an effort to specifically gather a list of issues and concerns from local officials and citizens. The issues identified in the 8 goal areas are used as a framework for the objectives and policy guidelines found in Chapter Five. The objectives and policy guidelines, in turn, provide specific information on the issues that are important in Litchfield and clearly define how decisions should be made by the City on a day-to-day basis.

The community's eight goals areas are listed below:

- 1. Citizen Participation and Intergovernmental Cooperation**
- 2. Economic Development**
- 3. Natural Resources**
- 4. Housing**
- 5. Transportation**
- 6. Land Use Planning**
- 7. Public Investments**
- 8. Sense of Community**

Identifying Issue with a Topic Area

Several of the issues identified in this Chapter could be placed in more than one topic area. For the purposes of minimizing the repetitiveness of issues, each issue is presented once in the goal area that best characterizes the issue.

Citizen Participation and Intergovernmental Cooperation

- **Public meetings** - The City should periodically hold public meetings to discuss the nature of important planning issues.
- **Public review** - Citizens should have adequate input and ample time to review important City documents, including the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance.
- **Public vote** - Citizens should have the opportunity to vote on the City's major planning issues.
- **Appoint task forces to address specific issues** - Citizen participation should be achieved through the creation of task forces assigned to research and evaluate specific issues.
- **Involve Meeker County and Litchfield Township in the planning process** - The planning activities of the City, Litchfield Township, and Meeker County are all impacted by each other. The City should seek input from these local units of government prior to making important land use decisions and the County's zoning in Litchfield's urban growth areas should be coordinated with the City's intended land use for that area.
- **City and Township cooperation** - Cooperation between the City of Litchfield and Litchfield Township is needed to effectively address new development in potential urban growth areas. The underlying philosophy is that the City and Township form one "community" and future land use decisions should be based on what is best for both local units of government.
- **Conduct meetings with neighboring local units of government** - Meetings should be conducted between City officials and neighboring city councils, township boards, and planning commissions to identify and address key issues.
- **Establish a collective vision for the Litchfield Community** - A collective vision for Litchfield should be established through land use plans and implemented accordingly.
- **Promote more local control on State and Federal projects** - Input from local residents and the City on State and Federal projects can help keep activities in conformance with the City's Comprehensive Plan and community needs.

Economic Development

- **Economic development that follows current and future infrastructure** - Commercial and industrial development should be encouraged to be located in areas that are currently (or soon will be) serviced by water, sewer, and streets in order to make the development more cost effective.
- **Location of industry** - New industrial development should first be directed towards currently developed industrial lands with measures taken to buffer the industrial use from other types of development.
- **Preferred businesses** - When attempting to attract new business to the City, the size, type, wages, jobs, and utility demand of the prospective companies should be taken into consideration. It is important that new businesses are compatible with current and future land use plans and that they create a positive impact on the local economy.
- **Promote innovative marketing strategies** - To strengthen the local economy, the City should develop innovative marketing strategies designed to attract new businesses.
- **Grant writing** - The City should be proactive in finding money to assist with a number of community projects, including funds for new housing, economic development, and public infrastructure.
- **Offer local businesses economic development tools** - Economic development tools such as tax increment financing, revolving loan funds, and tax abatement would be beneficial for existing or new businesses in Litchfield.
- **Tourism** - The City's location near many lakes, wooded areas, trails, parks, and hunting and fishing resources provide a wide variety of tourism opportunities. Tourism is an important part of the economy as it produces jobs and results in additional money being spent in the community.

Natural Resources

- **Protecting natural resources** - The Litchfield area has a diverse natural resource base that provides many economic, recreation, and aesthetic benefits to both residents and visitors. The City should support policies designed to protect these natural resources.
- **Protect, improve, and promote Lake Ripley** - Lake Ripley provides several recreational and economic benefits to the City of Litchfield and surrounding area. Improving Lake Ripley's water quality and enhancing its associated recreational opportunities are important to the tourism, property values, and aesthetic appeal of the community.
- **Value of open/"green" space** - Open spaces, or natural areas, provide recreational, ecological, and aesthetic value to an area.

- **Protect wetlands** - Wetlands provide numerous benefits, including improved water quality, flood water holding areas, and wildlife habitat. Land use decisions need to account for the importance of wetlands and use them as a benefit in future land use designs. The DNR should also be consulted on important wetland issues.
- **Wellhead protection** - A Wellhead Protection plan was recently completed for the City. This plan identifies the recharge areas of Litchfield's wells and outlines specific strategies for protecting the groundwater supply from contamination. The City should work in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Health in implementing this plan.
- **Consult local agencies** - Coordinated planning activities between the City and affected agencies (i.e., DNR, MPCA, Mn/DOT, etc.) could help to ensure that efficient growth occurs with minimal adverse impacts.

Housing

- **Future housing needs** - Housing studies should be conducted periodically to assess the quality, quantity, type, and need for new housing.
- **Quality housing** - The use of innovative housing subdivision designs can create higher concentrations of housing in an effort to minimize land consumption and preserve open space for all to enjoy. The emphasis in Litchfield; however, is quality first over quantity.
- **Subdivision development policies** - Subdivision development policies and regulations should be established in a way that gives developers an incentive to make the most efficient use of a piece of property, while protecting unique natural features.
- **Townhouses** - An increasing number of people are choosing to live in townhouses. They are especially nice for seniors and other people who want to avoid shoveling snow and mowing the lawn. Furthermore, homeowners associations often do a better job of keeping the property looking nice.
- **Pedestrian friendly** - New developments should include design concepts that accommodate people with a wide variety of needs, including youth, handicapped, and seniors.

Transportation

- **U.S. Highway 12 traffic management** - All traffic on U.S. Highway 12 goes through the center of Litchfield. While this is beneficial to many local businesses, it does create a substantial bottleneck for commercial truck traffic. The City and MnDOT need to examine traffic management options to address this issue, including revisiting the truck bypass alternative.
- **Frontage/backage roads** - The City should consider supporting the establishment of new frontage and/or backage roads adjacent to U.S. Highway 12. The ideal situation is to have the developers pay for the roads as part of approving their plat.
- **High-ton roads** - The majority of Litchfield's major roadways are high-ton roads either running adjacent to or passing through the community, including U.S. Highway 12 and State Highway 22. On one hand this is good because they can be used to attract businesses that are dependent upon access to high-ton roads. On the other hand, high-ton roads can often be associated with a number of nuisances, such as noise, safety, and increased traffic concerns. These issues need to be dealt with systematically by establishing policies designed to minimize these nuisances.
- **Future streets need to follow infrastructure** - The City needs to systematically plan for the expansion and new construction of streets as the community grows. This especially means connecting new roadways logically to existing roadways.
- **Street maintenance** - The maintenance of streets is an expensive, but necessary, component of the City's transportation system. Capital improvements planning for roadway maintenance should account for anticipated increases in traffic and the demand for additional roads.
- **Discouragement of cul-de-sacs and deadends** - Cul-De-Sacs and deadends pose several safety and snow removal related problems and should be discouraged in new development within the City.
- **Pedestrian safety** - Pedestrian concerns should be at the forefront of all planning and development activities.
- **Safety concerns** - Growth will result in increased traffic. Proper traffic controls such as signing, traffic lights, and access management regulations can help create safer roadways for the public.
- **Sign policies** - Street and other signs should be coordinated throughout the City in an effort to keep Litchfield safe and attractive. The location, size, shape, and color of signs should be regulated through a detailed sign ordinance.
- **Bike/walking trail** - Interest has been expressed in developing a recreational trail around Lake Ripley. The City should work with property owners on the lake and the DNR to explore options for the construction of this trail.

- **Public transit** - Providing public transportation opportunities for local residents can help alleviate traffic congestion and provide mobility for an aging population. The City needs to work with Meeker County Public Transit (MCPT) to help ensure that local transit needs are being met.
- **Railroad concerns** - The railroad, which runs through the City parallel to U.S. Highway 12, presents a number of key planning issues. For example, new railroad crossing points are extremely difficult to accomplish (because of safety and liability concerns expressed by the railroad companies). This harsh reality poses some difficult obstacles to which future land use options are available to the City. In short, the City should be prepared to “plan around” the railroad.

Land Use Planning

- **Urban growth boundaries** - The land surrounding Litchfield where growth is anticipated to occur is called the City’s “urban growth boundary”. Continuously working with Litchfield Township on identifying urban growth boundaries and determining the need for annexation agreements will be an important issue as the City experiences growth.
- **Location of future annexation** - The location of future annexations should occur in identified urban growth boundaries. Factors to take into consideration in determining the need for annexation include if the annexation promotes protecting the health, safety, and welfare of the public; the impact to residents and landowners in the proposed annexed area; costs incurred by the City to annex the property; the future tax implications of the annexation; and the future development opportunities in the area to be annexed.
- **Promote orderly annexation** - Orderly annexation promotes intergovernmental cooperation between cities and townships in determining the need for annexation and carrying out the process.
- **Land use coordination** - Coordination between the City’s and County’s zoning and subdivision regulations can help create orderly growth patterns for new development.
- **Current land use patterns** - Current land use patterns are important as they can indicate existing growth policies and can set the stage for what future development policies need to be implemented.
- **Minimize urban sprawl** - Growth in existing urban areas should occur before new land is acquired (when feasible) to help minimize urban sprawl and to cut down on costs of providing additional public infrastructure.
- **Examine current zoning policies** - The City will need to continually update its Zoning Ordinance in the future in order to ensure it is consistent with the City’s Comprehensive Plan.
- **Establish/maintain buffer strips between land uses** - Buffer strips located between land uses can provide separation and reduce conflicts between incompatible land uses.

- **Maintain rural/urban character** - Development policies and land use controls should be implemented so rural and urban areas can maintain their own identity and characteristics that are unique to each land use. Such policies and land use controls can prevent the appearance of a monotonous landscape from occurring and, in turn, preserve the amenities residents in those areas are seeking.
- **Residential lot size** - A maximum lot size in each zoning district sufficient to accommodate the needs of residents yet limit impacts to the landscape and environment should be established in the Zoning and Subdivision Ordinance.
- **Cluster or conservation subdivision development** - Cluster or conservation subdivision developments promote smaller lot sizes, shared or more cost effective infrastructure, and the establishment of public open spaces. These developments offer an alternative to large lot subdivisions and the large consumption of land.
- **Preservation of historical places** - The City has several historical buildings and places. In 1996, the National Register of Historical Places declared Litchfield's main street a Commercial Historic District. The City should explore all opportunities to preserve these areas, including the adoption of a preservation ordinance.
- **Shoreland management** - The City has adopted a Shoreland Management Ordinance that needs to be periodically reviewed and updated. In addition, the City's residents need to become better aware of the Ordinance, especially why it is needed.

Public Investments

- **Costs of new development and tax implications** - Prior to providing infrastructure to newly developed areas or to land that is anticipated to experience growth, the costs that will be incurred to provide water, sewer, streets, and other services to these areas should be determined. In some cases, the costs to provide services and infrastructure to new development exceed the taxes that will be generated. Also, new development can increase the property value of neighboring land, which results in these landowners paying higher taxes. Developers should pay 100 percent of infrastructure costs.
- **Parks and recreation** - As Litchfield grows, the City will need to identify new areas for parks and recreation. Some communities are now requiring each new development to reserve a certain percentage of the development for open space or recreational purposes (i.e., 10%). This could include something as simple as a picnic area or as detailed as a new park.
- **Capital Improvements** - The City will need to identify and plan for its major public projects on an annual basis. Cities often save money by being prepared for major public expenditures before they are needed.

Sense of Community

- **Balance between new development and preservation of natural resources** - Planning activities need to establish a balance that allows new development, while at the same time protecting natural resources.
- **Logical growth** - The City should closely examine its existing land use before future land use decisions are made. Often new development can lead to land use conflicts if the new development is not compatible with the existing land use.



Central Park in Litchfield, Minnesota