



Elgin Comprehensive Plan Community Meeting/Stakeholder Interview Summary

Two community meetings were held in Elgin on the evenings of January 7th and 8th 2008, with an attendance of almost 200 residents, to kick off the comprehensive planning process. In addition, the consultant team held several focus groups throughout the two-days with community leaders and local business owners. The meetings aimed to generate discussion about growth and development and other community issues that residents and community leaders would like to address in the Comprehensive Plan. This discussion and the ideas presented here provide critical information that will be integrated into the plan by the consultant team and the Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee. The following summary follows the facilitator questions that were used to guide the discussion groups and highlights the major themes from the meetings.

1. What do you like about living in Elgin?

When participants were asked what they liked about living or working in Elgin, the first response was almost always the “small town atmosphere.” This was typically followed by a discussion of how welcoming and friendly the people are in the community and how nice it is to know so many people in town. Several residents commented that a trip to the grocery store or post office usually results in “bumping into” several friends and neighbors. Though this is somewhat changing as the community grows, most residents felt that the sense of community and neighborliness is strong in Elgin.

Specific qualities mentioned that relate to the small-town character of Elgin include:

- The rural surroundings, open space and agricultural land
- Quietness of the community
- Low traffic levels within the community
- Historic Main Street

Specific elements identified that foster a strong community spirit in Elgin include:

- Festivals, Art Walks, and other community events (i.e. parades, Music and Movies in the Park, seniors game days)
- Local involvement in community and social organizations (i.e. churches, AARP, Friends of Elgin, coffee clubs, Chamber of Commerce)
- Welcoming, friendly residents
- Residents who feel a sense of ownership in the community and therefore are dedicated to improving it

Other positive community elements include:

- Historic downtown, recent reinvestment in Main Street
- Local heritage (i.e. railroads, brick industry, cotton gin, sausage)
- The strong presence of arts and culture in the community (i.e. art galleries, local art classes, music in the park, Art Walks)
- The compact layout of downtown and older neighborhoods, which makes it easy to walk around town
- Parks, the community pool, recent reinvestment in Thomas Park
- Close proximity to Austin
- Strong presence of local churches
- Quality public facilities such as the library, City Hall, and new schools
- Locally-owned businesses

- Safety and low crime rates
- Low cost of living
- Quality schools and local support for education (recent passage of bond referendum)
- A good place to raise children
- City government is approachable and responsive to residents
- Curbside recycling was recently introduced

2. *What are the special places and key features of Elgin that should be protected, restored, or better utilized?*

Elgin's parks were the most common feature mentioned in response to this question, followed by the historic downtown. Other commonly mentioned features and activities include:

- Agricultural land and open spaces
- Community activities and festivals
- Community facilities (i.e. library, City Hall, schools)
- Art Walks
- Churches
- Older homes and historic buildings that are not necessarily within the Historic District
- Unique local establishments that draw people to Elgin such as City Café, Meyers Sausage, Southside Market and BBQ, the veterinary hospital
- The local water source (the aquifer was noted as an element that needs to be protected)
- Cemeteries, which are currently at capacity and need to be expanded

3. *What are the opportunities that Elgin should capitalize on now and in the future?*

Responses to this question can generally be divided into two main categories. The first category identifies opportunities that build upon things that already exist in Elgin. The second category identifies opportunities that become possible due to the general growth and development of the region. Several residents noted that Elgin is currently in the position of being able to both protect and build upon its unique characteristics while also capitalizing on the tremendous growth potential of the region. Careful planning was noted as a key strategy to achieving this.

Opportunities that build upon Elgin's existing assets include:

- Elgin has the opportunity to market itself as a unique place to live or visit based on a variety of characteristics:
 - Active arts and culture in the community
 - Local history and the presence of historic buildings and neighborhoods
 - A rural atmosphere with open spaces that allow for farming, ranching, and environmental tourism
 - Small niche businesses and boutiques like those that exist on Main Street
- Elgin's location along the rail line provides an opportunity to bring commuter rail to the community. This may help attract residential, commercial, and mixed-use development, while also giving residents easier access to jobs in Austin.
- The active freight rail line provides opportunities to attract industry and jobs to Elgin.
- Elgin's main transportation corridors (US 290 and SH 95) provide opportunities for commercial and business growth.
- Active agriculture in the area provides an opportunity to have a local farmers market in downtown.

- Elgin is close to Austin, which is a leader in sustainable, “green” building practices. This could be an opportunity to integrate sustainable development in the community and market Elgin as a “green” alternative to other communities.

Opportunities that arise from future population growth and development include:

- The ability to attract jobs and industry to the area. This will provide more opportunities for existing residents, attract new residents, and provide necessary tax revenue to pay for infrastructure and services.
- Attracting additional retail, restaurants, and entertainment facilities. This will offer convenience for residents as well as generate sales tax revenue for the City.
- Attracting higher-quality commercial and residential development.
- Attracting entertainment facilities such as a theatre, bowling alley, or recreation center.
- Enhancing the tax base in order to finance additional public recreational facilities such as parks, hike and bike trails, and a recreation center.

4. *What are the biggest challenges and issues facing Elgin today?*

5. *What challenges do you see ahead in the Future?*

Because of the similarity of these two questions, the responses are combined in the summary.

Much of the discussion of issues centered around the question of how Elgin should grow in a way that protects the small-town identity and character while also attracting important community elements such as jobs, retail conveniences, healthcare facilities, and entertainment options. Though the discussion focused on identifying issues, many people also proposed solutions, or recommendations on how the City should be addressing these issues. The main points of discussion are summarized below:

- Growth and Development
 - Elgin needs to maintain its character and small-town feel as growth occurs.
 - Growth needs to be planned or managed to ensure that it occurs in a coordinated manner.
 - Growth needs to be encouraged in all areas of the community, not just toward Austin.
 - Future development should be of a high quality that instills pride in the community. This can be done through better architectural standards and development regulations as well as the incorporation of amenities (such as green space, or a golf course) into development projects.
 - The connectivity of new development should be enhanced through improved street layout, and provision of pedestrian amenities such as sidewalks or trails.
 - Elgin needs to attract a variety of housing types to accommodate residents of all income levels and ages. New housing development in Elgin has been focused on starter homes and this needs to be balanced with the provision of higher-end, “move-up” housing.
- Tax Base
 - Elgin’s tax base is highly dependent on residential properties, which typically don’t generate enough revenue to account for the cost of services and infrastructure.
 - Elgin needs to attract industry and retail development to diversify the tax base and reduce the property tax burden on residents.

- Without a robust, sustainable tax base, Elgin cannot afford to make other improvements desired by residents.
 - An enhanced tax base is needed to financially support the additional demands that growth is placing on local schools.
- Employment and Economic Growth
 - Elgin needs more job opportunities to give residents the option to both live and work in the community.
 - There is currently a lack of employment options for Elgin’s youth and young adults returning from college.
 - Elgin should aim to attract businesses in a planned manner by setting aside specific areas for industry and commercial development. Incentives may be necessary to attract quality businesses.
- Attracting Retail
 - Many residents of Elgin choose to shop in nearby communities because these stores offer improved selection, longer hours, and lower prices than stores in Elgin.
 - Because many residents shop in other communities, Elgin misses out on important sales tax revenue.
 - Though many people want to attract large-scale national retailers to the City, there is a concern among some residents that these stores may take business away from existing local retailers on Main Street.
 - National retailers have chosen to locate in surrounding communities but not Elgin—many residents would like to see this type of retail growth in Elgin.
- Transportation
 - Traffic congestion along US 290 into Austin creates significant delays and is unpredictable.
 - Those without access to a car need access to alternative modes of transportation such as public transit, demand-response transit, walking, and biking.
 - Traffic congestion around school sites is problematic and will worsen when the new middle school opens.
 - The City could use another east/west arterial through town.
 - Connectivity needs to be improved for cars as well as pedestrians through the street layout and physical form of the community.
- Infrastructure
 - Elgin needs to maintain and improve existing infrastructure to ensure that older areas of the community have equitable levels of service to newer areas.
 - The City needs more sidewalks, especially in areas around schools.
- Health and Safety
 - Elgin does not have adequate healthcare facilities. There is not a 24-hour emergency room or hospital, and existing doctors are not taking new patients.
 - Problems with drug dealing and personal safety need to be addressed through strategies such as increasing the police force, working to retain existing officers, and improving the lighting in parking lots and streets.

- The lack of sidewalks around new school sites creates a safety issue for children who walk or bike to school.
- Downtown
 - Downtown is important to Elgin’s identity and history. This area needs to be protected and promoted as the City grows.
 - Downtown should be marketed and promoted as an arts and cultural destination.
 - Downtown needs additional retail, restaurant and entertainment options.
 - High rent in downtown is a deterrent to attracting business and residential tenants.
 - The existing zoning ordinance and building codes can pose barriers to the adaptive reuse and renovation of historic buildings.
- Community Facilities and Programs
 - Elgin needs a community center that can be used for a wide range of community education and recreation activities.
 - Elgin needs a diverse range of programs and activities for youth and seniors.
 - Additional parks, trails, and sports facilities are needed.
- Education
 - Residential growth is placing a burden on the education system because school population is growing faster than the tax base to financially support schools.
 - A high quality public school system is essential to attracting residential and job growth.
 - Community education and adult job training may be needed to develop a skilled workforce.
- Miscellaneous issues
 - The cemeteries in town are at capacity.
 - Citizen involvement in local decision-making is necessary and residents need to be proactive about getting involved in local issues.
 - Inter-governmental coordination (among the City, Counties, EISD, and regional entities) will be important as the City grows.

6. *How do you feel about the recent growth and development that is occurring here in Elgin and in surrounding communities?*

- Positive examples or elements of new development include:
 - New public facilities are very nice and appropriate for Elgin’s context (i.e. Library, City Hall, EISD administrative offices, Chamber of Commerce building).
 - Remodeling and restoration of landmark buildings (railroad depot) as well as older residential neighborhoods.
 - The new nursing home, Franklin Bank, 1st National Bank, and the façade of the Southwest Market & Barbeque restaurant are all positive examples of high-quality new development in the area.
- Negative elements of new development include:
 - Design of residential and commercial buildings is not unique and has a “cookie-cutter”, generic appearance.

- Residential subdivisions should provide more amenities such as parkland, open space, landscaping, trails, school sites, and sidewalks.
- Residential lot sizes are too small in some of the recently-built subdivisions, these small-lots need to be balanced with some larger-lots so that subdivisions don't look so monotonous.
- Loss of green space is a negative impact of recent growth, development should be balanced with green space preservation.
- Mixed-use development (integration of residential, retail and office) is preferred to the recent type of development that has occurred.
- Newer subdivisions have poor connectivity internally and to the broader community.
- Would like to see the adaptive re-use of older buildings (renovation of older buildings in a way that accommodates other uses or functions).
- On-street parking is a problem in some of the newer subdivisions that have narrow streets.
- The style and quality of commercial development on US 290 does not create a positive impression of Elgin.
- The new schools in west Elgin were not located strategically and they were not built with pedestrian access to allow children to walk to school.
- Elgin should require higher-quality development through increased architectural standards, higher quality materials, and improved landscaping.
- Elgin should try to maintain its rural, agricultural feel—existing subdivisions are not accomplishing this.
- Elgin needs to balance residential growth with commercial growth. Additional rooftops without commercial businesses create a tax burden on residents.

7. *Are neighborhoods adequately protected from incompatible development?*

Many participants noted that this has not been an issue recently due to the lack of commercial growth in the City. Residents were generally more interested in proactively identifying the type of commercial growth they would like to see so that the City could establish appropriate regulations and incentives to achieve this. Many people commented that they would prefer to see a greater integration of land uses (such as a mixed use development project that allows for residential, office and retail in one location) as long as impacts are addressed and the buildings are sensitive to the surroundings. Some residents noted that this could be accomplished through a form-based zoning code, which focuses on building form, architecture, and design rather than the specific land use of the property.

8. *Do residents of Elgin currently have adequate access to jobs, schools, retail and services, entertainment and cultural facilities, health care, recreational opportunities, etc.?*

The overwhelming response to this question was no, with residents identifying a long list of elements they would like to see brought to Elgin. Those most frequently noted are listed below:

- Medical and healthcare facilities, especially emergency care and 24-hour facilities.
- Community education and higher education facilities.
- Employment opportunities
- Additional retail and restaurant options
- Local entertainment venues such as movie theatres, bowling alleys, and performing arts facilities.

- Entertainment options/recreational centers for children, youth and families.
- Quality, attractive affordable housing for seniors and young professionals (it was noted that most EISD school teachers live outside of Elgin due to lack of housing options).
- Additional parks, hike and bike trails, and recreation facilities.

9. *What issues should be the highest priority for the City to address in the coming years?*

The most commonly identified priorities are listed below:

- Managed or strategically planned development that accommodates growth while also preserving Elgin's character and small-town charm.
- A hospital or 24 hour medical/emergency facility.
- Employment and business growth (in a strategic and planned manner).
- A diverse tax base that provides sustainable funding for services and minimizes the tax burden on residents.
- A community/recreation center with programs for residents of all ages (with a particular emphasis on the youth and elderly).
- Increase the presence of law enforcement to reduce and prevent crime.
- Provide transportation options such as transit, commuter rail, and elder transportation for those who don't have access to a car.
- A wider variety of retail, dining, and entertainment options.
- Protect Elgin's Historic buildings and revitalize downtown.
- Quality schools.
- Maintain and extend infrastructure (roads, sidewalks, city utilities).
- Manage traffic and congestion.
- Attract high-quality housing (which will drive other needs such as retail, entertainment, and schools).

The following priorities were supported by several individuals:

- Attract entertainment venues (i.e. movie theatre, bowling alley) for youth and teens.
- Provide sidewalks to schools.
- Improve or develop additional parks and recreation facilities.
- Protect agricultural land and open space.
- Assisted living for seniors.
- Embrace diversity in the community through support of minority-owned businesses and the promotion of cultural activities and events.
- Ensure that east Elgin has adequate infrastructure, utilities and resources.
- Improved/more visible road signage.
- Address the issue of day laborers.
- New cemetery within the community.
- Build a no-kill animal shelter.
- Revitalize the railroad.
- Promote the benefits of shopping locally and supporting independent business owners.
- Clean-up abandoned housing and buildings.
- Address parking and safety issues in new subdivisions with narrow streets
- Defining Elgin's identity and image—is Elgin a small town or bedroom community to Austin?