

St. Charles Comprehensive Plan
Project Initiation Workshop
Wednesday, August 31, 2011

On Wednesday, August 31, 2011, the first Community Workshop for the Comprehensive Plan process was held. The workshop was the first of many face-to-face outreach events scheduled for the Comprehensive Planning Process. During this meeting, residents were given an opportunity to voice their concerns, the things they like about the City, and to hear the ideas of their friends and neighbors. Additionally, this event provided a chance for community members to learn about the purpose of a comprehensive plan and the process to be undertaken.

Workshop Questionnaire

The workshop included a questionnaire that solicited participants' input regarding issues and concerns in the City's planning area. The following is a summary of the thoughts, comments, and opinions obtained during the workshop.

1. Identify five issues or concerns confronting the City of St. Charles.

While responses to this question ranged from preserving the community's charm to introducing more industry into the area, the responses were generally in agreement with one another. The community's broad vision for itself includes preservation, cooperation, growth, and maintenance. The responses have been classified into more specific topics: (a) Pedestrian and Bike Transportation; (b) Transportation/Transit; (c) Quality of Life; (d) Image and Identity; (e) Schools; (f) Economic Development; (g) Housing; (h) Government and Taxes; (i) Parks and Open Space.

Pedestrian and Bike Issues

Throughout the event the issue of pedestrian and bike provisions were raised. The comments ranged from a general lack of sidewalks throughout the City to more specific suggestions such as transforming the vacant Union Pacific Railway into a bike trail. Pedestrian friendliness in general was the most popular comment, with residents desiring more walkable neighborhoods and development patterns—especially downtown. Bike friendliness and the addition of more bike lanes was also brought up.

Transportation/Transit

Traffic was the most frequently cited issue in this category. While congestion was the main issue, truck traffic on Main Street was also a popular comment. Residents expressed a desire to have truck traffic re-routed so that it doesn't cut through downtown. Residents also expressed a desire for better transit options both within St. Charles and to regional destinations. A linkage between the Geneva Metra station and St. Charles was a primary concern.

Quality of Life

Residents expressed a desire for more entertainment and gathering spaces, especially alternatives to the bars downtown. Residents expressed their pride in St. Charles, but also acknowledged that more needs to be done to attract outside visitors while maintaining a high quality of life and family atmosphere.

Image and Identity

While there was no broad consensus in this category, comments did tend to group into a few themes: development patterns, preservation and beautification, and population. Residents overwhelmingly mentioned the need to preserve the existing charm of the City. Residents expressed concerns about the types of development that have been occurring in St. Charles and the effect those patterns have on outside perceptions. Numerous times residents described “cookie cutter” and “big box” development as undesirable. They also described the downtown as fragmented. Residents expressed concern over graffiti and urban blight. Finally, a number of comments concerning the changing demographics of the City were made. While these comments were never specific, they seemed to describe the need to accommodate people of different cultures and traditions.

Schools

Residents are concerned about the age and quality of the City’s schools. While a number of school comments were raised including overcrowding, school system complexity, and a general need to improve schools, there was no consensus on specific problems or action to be taken to address the issues. In question 4, residents rated the schools as a top asset

Economic Development

Economic development issues centered around attracting and growing business in the community, filling in vacancies, maintaining sales tax revenue, and re-starting stalled development. Many comments concerned the Charlestowne Mall site and the need to fill vacancies there or develop an alternative plan. The vacant First Street property was also a concern, as was the St. Charles Mall site.

Housing

Residents expressed concern over the proliferation of multi-family buildings and their compatibility with surrounding neighborhoods on a number of occasions. Affordability and senior/special needs housing were also popular topics. One resident suggested a renter ordinance, a comment which received some support with attendees, especially in question 4.

Government and Taxes

Comments in this category revolved around creating a balanced budget, lowering taxes, inter-governmental cooperation and transparency, and code enforcement. Residents seemed frustrated with a perceived inability to influence the decision makers at City Hall. There were also some issues of trust that were raised as to the function of a Comprehensive Plan and the influence that developers might wield over the process. Many residents expressed a desire for the City Administration to become more visionary and focused on quality development for the City.

Parks and Open Space

Residents of St. Charles are proud of the Fox River, one of the community's defining features. Residents expressed a desire for the preservation and continued development of the Fox River for the use of everyone. Ideas that were floated included setting aside vacant lots adjacent to the River for park space, creating a protected corridor along the River, boat slips, and preservation of the existing charm.

List, in order of importance, the three most important issues described thus far

Responses to question two were split between four primary issues as well as a number of secondary issues. 26 people rated the charm of the community and/or historic preservation as a top issue. The second most popular response was tied between improving upon and preserving the beauty and character of the Fox River and developing vacant land and storefronts. Downtown was also a popular topic with most respondents wishing to preserve or improve upon the charming and historic downtown.

Improve-Preserve the River

Residents expressed their pride for the Fox River overwhelmingly, but they also expressed concern for the maintenance of the River as a community asset. Some ideas that were floated in this category included a protected river corridor, a river walk, and park development along the river.

Preserve/Improve Downtown

Many residents view downtown as the heart of the St. Charles community because it distinguishes St. Charles from neighboring communities, offering a strong sense of place as well as retail and entertainment opportunities. Some residents feel there are too many bars in downtown and others expressed concern over a general lack of variety in the types of businesses in this area. Truck traffic cutting through downtown was also a major concern, as was the pedestrian friendliness of downtown with safe crossings lacking and too much high speed traffic. Finally, some residents were concerned at the lack of parking in downtown, especially near the library.

Charm/Historic Preservation

One of residents' favorite things about downtown is the charm of the community and the historic architecture. Residents appreciate the fact that much of St. Charles has avoided the "cookie cutter" feel of other communities. Many residents wish to retain and continue to refine this charm.

Develop Vacancies

Residents expressed dismay at both vacant storefronts and vacant lots throughout this community, with the areas to the east along Main Street, the Charlestowne and St. Charles Mall sites, and downtown receiving most of the attention in this category. A few residents expressed a desire to develop responsibly and avoid catering to developers who have a short-term outlook on their projects and put profit before the needs of the greater community.

The following page contains a list of all the topics and their corresponding tallies:

Topic	Count	Topic	Count
Charm/Historic Preservation	26	Comp Plan Guidelines	2
Develop Vacancy [Responsibly]	15	Develop/Rethink Retail	2
Improve/Preserve the River	15	Education Improvements	2
Preserve /Improve Downtown	12	Long-term thinking	2
Pedestrian Improvements	9	New Industry	2
Charlestowne Mall Redevelop	7	Not Cater to Developers	2
Gateways	7	Public Space Improvements	2
New Transit	6	Property Values	2
Protect Natural Areas/Green Spcae	6	St Charles Mall	2
Traffic	6	Taxes Too High	2
Housing/Density Concentration	5	Traffic Enforcement	2
Sense of Place/Place-Making	5	Adhere to already established plans	1
Attract New Businesses	4	Code Enforcement	1
Economic Development	4	Complete Stalled Evelopment	1
Rental Ordinance	4	District Synergy	1
Build tax base	3	Family Friendly	1
DT Truck/Through Traffic	3	Illegal Immigration	1
Improve Infrastructure	3	Marketing STC	1
Land Use/Retail Mix	3	Noise and Light Pollution	1
New University/College	3	Plan Flexibility	1
Parking	3	Railroad Bike Path	1
Responsible Development	3	Renewable Energy Future	1
Balanced Budget	2	Special Needs Housing	1
Changing Demographics	2	Stop Red Gate	1
City/Government Communication	2	West Side Blight	1

2. Identify three specific projects or actions that you would like to see undertaken in St. Charles

Residents' suggestions on this topic were far-reaching, but a few ideas came up frequently including the preservation and development of the riverfront, local transit connections, development of the Charlestowne Mall site, Pedestrian and Bike Improvements, and attracting a College/University to the area to help spur development and develop a sense of place.

Develop Old St. Charles Mall Site

Residents believe the former St. Charles Mall is a prominent development opportunity and mentioned a number of development possibilities including high density residential and new retail as possible development options.

River Plan/Corridor/Riverfront Development

Again, residents listed riverfront development and preservation as a top concern. Among the ideas mentioned were land acquisition and riverfront protection, river walk development, and park space.

Pedestrian/Bike Improvements

Residents like the areas of St. Charles that allow them to safely and comfortably walk and ride their bikes. Many want more bike lanes, a reduction in truck traffic through downtown, a truck bypass, and an expanded trail system that could include old railroad rights of way. Additionally, better crosswalks and slower traffic were mentioned in this category.

Local Transit Connections

Residents would like to see better transit connections both within the City of St. Charles and also to outside destinations. A Metra connection to Geneva was frequently mentioned. Some residents with to see trolley/light rail system for the community. Other ideas included a bus circulator system and a monorail.

Attract a College/University

Residents would like to see a college or university attracted to the area because it would act as a catalyst for development and provide the City with outside recognition.

The tally from this section follows:

Topic	Count	Topic	Count
River Plan/Corridor/Riverfront Development	13	Demographics	1
Local Transit Connections	12	Development Guidelines	1
Develop old St Charles Mall Site	11	Economic Development	1
Attract College/University	10	Events Department	1
Pedestrian/Bike Improvements	10	Expand Golf Course	1
Develop Revitalize Downtown	8	Fund Schools	1
Railroad to Ped/Bike Path	7	Historic Preservation	1
Residential Rental Ordinance	7	Increase Tax Revenue	1
Attract businesses/industry	6	Library Expansion	1
Enhance Charlestowne Mall	6	Make Main Street Pedestrian Friendly	1
Finish First Street	6	Make Vacant 1st St Property a Park	1
Stop Red Gate	6	Marketing Plan	1
Parking	5	More Police	1
Develop Vacant Land/Storefronts	4	Move Downtown Carnivals	1
Gateways	4	N/S Retail Business Avenue	1
Main Street Trucks	4	New Bridge	1
New Parks/Playgrounds	4	New Elected Officials	1
Schools	3	Open Space	1
Traffic General	3	Plan for Transportation	1
Alternative Energy Develop	2	Preserve Charm	1
Application of Plan Recommendations	2	Preserve First Street Green Space	1
Better Traffic Flow I64	2	Public Health Initiative	1
Downtown Marina	2	Public Spaces	1
Enforce Property Codes	2	Railway as bypass	1
Flooding	2	Remove Dam	1
More/Better Communication	2	Renewable Energy Projects	1
No More Bars	2	Tot Lots	1
Preserve Parks	2	Traffic Speeds on I64	1
Repair/Maintain Infrastructure	2	Use Boy Scout Island	1
Arts to Community	1	Widen Main Street	1
Assist Developers on East Side	1	Youth Area Downtown	1

3. What are the primary strengths and assets of the City of St Charles?

While much of the workshop focused on opportunities for improvement within the community, the workshop ended on a high note, with residents expressing those things that they like about St. Charles. It is important to identify the positive assets of the community so that they are not lost in the effort to address the weaknesses.

The Fox River

Again, the Fox River was a frequent answer. Residents believe the River defines the community and wish to preserve and protect it.

Schools

Schools are a top priority for residents. Many believe the school system in St. Charles is of a high quality and is a major reason to live in the community.

Parks

Residents in St. Charles love the natural beauty of the Fox River Valley and they rank parks as high on their list of things that are good about the city.

People/Pride/Sense of Community

This category was broad, but it focused on friends and neighbors, the close knit community, and the sense of pride residents have for St. Charles.

Charm / Historic Character

Again, residents listed the charm and historic character as a top asset they wish to retain and build upon.

A list of all the ideas in this category and their corresponding tallies follow.

Topic	Count	Topic	Count
River	40	Trails	2
People/Pride/Community	21	Bars/Restaurants	1
Schools	21	Big Trees	1
Parks	20	Clean City	1
Charm	17	Community Events	1
Historic	17	Department Stores In Town	1
Downtown	7	Downtown Night Life	1
Open Space	7	Family-Friendly	1
Bike Paths	6	Flora and Fauna	1
Architecture	4	Height Limit	1
City Government	4	Inexpensive Electricity	1
Good Place to Raise Family	4	Local Grocery	1
Size/Population	4	Mayor	1
Neighborhoods	3	Natural Resources	1
Arcada	2	Opportunity for Public Engagement	1
Diversity	2	Property Values	1
Economic Diversity	2	Public Services	1
Festivals	2	Quiet Streets	1
Intergovernmental Agreements/Cooperation	2	Sense of Place	1
Library	2	Sidewalks	1
Location	2	Street Trees	1
Recreational Areas	2	Theater and Entertainment	1
Safety	2	Tourism	1
Sense of Community	2	Upscale Shops	1