

Sandwich Planning Priorities Report

Stakeholder Interview Summary Report

The Sandwich Planning Priorities Report is being developed through a comprehensive process of public outreach and existing conditions research. To gain a broad understanding of the community's thoughts, concerns, and priorities, CMAP conducted in-person interviews with 15 community, business, and government leaders over a two-day period in late May 2018. CMAP has also analyzed the results of a public-opinion survey conducted by the City of Sandwich in March 2017, and created a website to share project-related information with the public.

This Stakeholder Interview Summary Report provides an overview of the community feedback received during interviews and background research through July 2018. Public outreach will continue to be a central element of the planning process throughout the development of this project. Additional community feedback receiving during the coming months will be included in the final Planning Priorities Report, which is scheduled for adoption in December 2018.

Key Findings

- **Residents value the city's small town feel.** Sandwich is a walkable community with an active downtown. Residents, business owners, and community leaders highlighted this as one of the city's greatest strengths.
- **Residents value downtown businesses,** and would like to see more storefronts in the area. There is also interest in providing additional types of businesses, with an emphasis on those serving local needs.
- **The Sandwich Fair is a central element of the city's identity,** but the fair does not bring many visitors or tourism dollars into the city itself. The greater Sandwich area could benefit from increased coordination with the Fair.
- **The city's residents are aging, and the current housing stock may not be adequate for all residents to remain in the city long-term.**

Stakeholder interviews

The primary public engagement activity for this project has been a series of stakeholder interviews conducted at Sandwich City Hall on May 30th and 31st, 2018. In total, CMAP staff interviewed 15 community members representing a wide range of social, economic, educational, and community organizations. The interviews were informal and confidential, which allowed for a free and open exchange of thoughts, concerns, and priorities. The topical summaries presented below reflect numerous conversations, and cannot be attributed to a single individual or organization.

Downtown Sandwich

Almost all interviewees highlighted downtown Sandwich as one of the community's greatest strengths. The area, which extends roughly one block north and south of Railroad Street, is home to numerous small, local businesses, in addition to City Hall, the Sandwich Opera House, and the Stone Mill Museum. The area serves as the community's center, and provides residents with a strong sense of place.

Among the area's many assets are the general walkability of the shops, restaurants, and other destinations, as well as the clean, well-maintained appearance of most buildings. Many communities in northeastern Illinois are seeking to create walkable town centers—Sandwich already has one. Several residents mentioned the importance of maintaining the downtown area's historic character, specifically highlighting restoration projects at the Opera House and the Stone Mill Museum. The City does not currently operate historic preservation or façade improvement programs.

Many of the challenges highlighted during the interviews are similar to those seen in small downtowns throughout the region. Vacancy rates, while not yet a major concern in Sandwich, are increasing, likely due to competition from e-commerce. Vacancy rates are further influenced by strict fire codes, which sometimes require expansive improvements before a new business can open. Landlords are reluctant to cover the cost of the upgrades, and some business owners decide to locate their business elsewhere, rather than pay for upgrades to a building they do not own. Finally, several residents mentioned trains passing through town as a challenge. Sandwich grew up around the BNSF railroad, and while the trains no longer stop, they continue to pass through town at high speeds. There appears to be broad interest in exploring the feasibility of a quiet zone along the tracks.

Economic development

Numerous stakeholders emphasized the importance of economic development in the City of Sandwich. The downtown area is home to several small businesses, including numerous antique shops and restaurants. The downtown area also has a local grocery store, though many residents said they need to leave the city to complete most of their errands. These individuals indicated that they would prefer to have more local-serving businesses within city limits. Several big box stores have opened up in neighboring Plano, and while these businesses

provide important services, their location means that residents must travel further to reach them, and the tax dollars they generate do not go to the City of Sandwich.

In recent years, much of the city's economic development has occurred on the eastern side of town, which is home to a cluster of commercial and industrial businesses along Route 34. Specifically, this area contains a large auto dealership, a hotel, a movie theater, several auto-oriented restaurants, a gym, and numerous small to medium-sized manufacturers. Many of the properties surrounding this business cluster are zoned for industrial or commercial use, but are currently used for agriculture. The area lacks sidewalk connections, and is accessible only by automobile.

Business leaders and residents alike highlighted the community's low tax rate, access to a quality hospital and convention center, and the availability of land as important economic assets. Interviewees also expressed concern for the area's distance from major hubs, and noted that development had not yet recovered to pre-recession levels.

Tourism

The Sandwich Fair, held annually for five days in September, is a central element of the city's identity, and has the potential to be a major driver of the city's economy. Each year, the fair attracts more than 175,000 visitors from throughout the region, but because the fair is located outside of city limits, and transportation plans focus on keeping visitors off of local streets, many visitors to the fair never visit Sandwich itself. Several residents and business owners expressed interest in encouraging Fair visitors to spend time in the city, as a strategy for building awareness about everything the community has to offer.

Several interviewees also expressed interest in holding more one-time events in the City of Sandwich, as a way to bring more people downtown and increase the city's image as a destination for antiquing, shopping, and dining.

Land use, development, and the built environment

Development, especially single family residential development, was a recurring theme during the interviews, and there appears to be no consensus about what form future development should take. Prior to the recession, the greater Sandwich area experienced a building boom, and a significant amount of land was annexed into the city in expectation of future development. In some cases, these annexed lands were platted and construction began. Today, some of these properties remain vacant, despite the construction of local roadways and the expansion of utility infrastructure.

Some residents expressed a desire to see Sandwich add as many new residents as possible, while others wanted to concentrate on managing growth to create more diverse, walkable neighborhoods for current and future residents. Opinions on future growth were often tied to the impact that more or less growth would have on the finances of specific organizations and institutions (businesses, schools, parks, roadways, etc.).

Generally, most interviewees supported development that encourages walkability and accessibility, especially for children, and especially in the immediate, downtown area. Almost all interviewees highlighted the city's small town character as a major strength that should be protected, even while planning for new growth. More than one interviewee also mentioned the importance of having adequate site review processes in place prior to approving new developments, to ensure transportation, stormwater, and other land use effects are fully understood. Most residents supported the city's current mixture of land uses, characterized by industrial and commercial development on the east side of town, a mixture of residential and commercial uses in the downtown area, and primarily single family residential development radiating out from the city's core.

Transportation

Transportation was mentioned in some form by every interviewee. Generally, the city has a good local transportation system that balances the needs of cars, pedestrians, and bicycles, though there is room for improvement. Regionally, the city has good access to neighboring communities via Route 34, though access to larger highways and train service is limited.

Most interviewees thought that Sandwich was a fairly easy place to get around, and while all people interviewed relied on a car or truck as their primary mode of transportation, several individuals mentioned a desire to one day be comfortable enough to walk or bike to their jobs. Strengths of the city's local transportation system included human-scaled blocks and neighborhoods, few hard-to-cross intersections, and many local destinations in the downtown area. Potential areas of concerns for the local transportation system included sidewalk and road repair, especially in lower-volume areas, a lack of accessible sidewalks in the commercial area east of town, and few pedestrian or bicycle amenities along roadways. Several interviewees also mentioned that parking sometimes becomes scarce during major events, especially when the downtown lots by the train tracks are used for vendor and exhibition booths.

Regionally, Sandwich residents have access to Amtrak via the Plano train station, roughly five miles east of downtown Sandwich. The nearest Metra station is located in Aurora. Several individuals mentioned a Metra extension as a long-term goal that would help connect Sandwich to the greater Chicago region. While Sandwich no longer has a train station, freight and passenger trains frequently pass through town, and several interviewees expressed frustration with the noise caused by their whistles.

Aging in place

Many of Sandwich's older residents have lived in the community for most of their lives, and would like to continue living in the area. Despite this, there are real challenges for elderly residents in Sandwich. Many homes are not ADA accessible, and there are few locations in town where residents can walk to parks, grocery stores, and other daily needs. Senior housing has a bad reputation in the community, and existing facilities will likely be inadequate to serve future needs, as the city's population continues to age. Several interviewees mentioned the need for more community-oriented activities, especially those that involve multiple generations of

residents. The need to support elderly residents so they are able to remain in their homes, or new, smaller homes closer to the downtown area, was also mentioned.

Parks and recreation

Several residents and community leaders highlighted the importance of high quality parks. The Sandwich Park District currently offers a range of programs for residents of all ages. Because Plano, Somonauk, and Lake Holiday do not have their own park districts, the Sandwich Park District also serves these communities, for a nominal fee. Several residents highlighted the success of the city's new splash park, and expressed interest in building a community pool. There was also broad support for building bicycle and pedestrian trails, both for recreation, and transportation.

Natural Resources

During the interviews, several residents and government leaders expressed concern for stormwater management, especially in newly built subdivisions. In some cases, these developments were created without adequate stormwater facilities, and residents have been forced to adapt to moderate flooding during heavy rains. In addition to flooding, several residents expressed concern for the area's long-term water supply, noting concern about the viability of the St. Peter's aquifer. Additional challenges with water delivery and water pressure—due to differing sizes of the city's water mains—were also mentioned. Several residents expressed a desire for preserving open space along nearby creeks and waterways, both for natural habitat, and as a flood control measure.

Government and public services

Generally, most individuals interviewed believe the community receives high quality public services from the various government entities servicing the area (City, parks, schools, library, etc.). Residents and business leaders appreciated the responsiveness of public officials, and highlighted that it was one of the things they appreciated about living and working in a small town. The primary challenge for delivering high quality public services (as mentioned by community leaders) is the high cost of capital improvements, relative to the small size of the community. This challenge means that public officials must be careful to prioritize funding appropriately to maximize the return on their investment.

City of Sandwich Resident Survey, March 2017

The City's 2017 Resident Survey was conducted in partnership with Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies, and was designed to help the City prioritize future actions and develop a more comprehensive understanding of residents' concerns and opinions. The survey consisted of a two-page questionnaire that was mailed to 1,260 voting households. During the one-month survey period, the City received 466 responses (37 percent response rate). Respondents tended to be older and wealthier than average, and more likely to own a home.

Among respondents, economic development and street/road repair were the top priorities. Most respondents said the city was a good (61.1 percent) or excellent (23.1 percent) place to live. Sandwich's small town feel was overwhelmingly seen as the city's strongest asset. The most common concerns for the city were a lack of shopping and dining options, followed by street/road maintenance, high taxes, home maintenance, and deteriorating sidewalks.