

3. Community Identity

Organization

- A. Overview
- B. Goal
- C. Key Findings
- D. Objectives and Strategies

Purpose

The purpose of the Community Identity Chapter is to address how the community can enhance and strengthen its historic small town atmosphere, which is its defining characteristic.

A. Overview

Northfield is defined by its location on the Cannon River (one of only six rivers in Minnesota with a “Wild and Scenic River” designation), its authentic and vital downtown, historic buildings, a vital arts and cultural presence, rural elements, historic events such as the foiling of the bank robbery by the James and Younger gang, two top-ranked private colleges, a quality public school system, strong community organizations, and a tradition of public involvement, all of which comprise Northfield’s identity and create its strong sense of place.

These features, which have defined Northfield’s character for its first 150 years, can also provide direction for the preservation and enhancement of the community moving into the twenty-first century.

Northfield residents have expressed a strong desire to maintain the community’s historic town character in its rural agricultural setting. This desire implies that future development should be considerate of the elements that have historically defined Northfield’s small-town character, including its agricultural heritage, local architectural and design elements, and the traditional form and pattern of the community.

Much of the development in Northfield in the last thirty years has not complemented this small-town character. New development has led to the creation of commercial corridors and numerous residential subdivisions without a true sense of place. If the community is to continue to develop in such a pattern, a point will be reached when the community character is compromised.

The land use principles, outlined in Chapter 4 of this Plan, provide a baseline for the return to development practices that will once again foster and strengthen the small-town character of Northfield. The principles have been used to develop the Objectives and Strategies found in this Comprehensive Plan. The remaining sections of this chapter include:

- B. Goal
- C. Key Findings
- D. Objectives and Strategies

The goal, objectives and strategies reflect key findings and public input that were gathered as part of the Northfield Comprehensive Plan update planning process. **It is important to note the community’s vision for the future has not changed significantly since the**

completion of the 2001 Comprehensive Plan. The zoning and subdivision regulations will be revised to reflect the 2008 Comprehensive Plan. The guiding principles and goals in the 2001 Plan related to community identity are reflected in the recommendations of this chapter.

B. Goal

A goal is a policy statement that states a desired outcome in general terms. The goal was developed by considering key principles, and integrating public input generated as part of the Plan update. The goal for community identity is provided below.

Decisions influencing Northfield's future land development will reflect the city's history and natural and built environments, and enhance social capital.

C. Key Findings

Existing conditions research was conducted as part of the Comprehensive Plan update. Information was compiled from a variety of sources such as field surveys, existing plans and codes, and input from several public meetings. Outlined below is a summary of key findings related to Northfield's community identity.

Importance of the Cannon River: The Cannon River was an essential component of Northfield's identity, as settlers located to utilize its power to help establish a trade center and build the community. The river also provides the basic topographical shape to the community and to a degree dictates travel patterns and infrastructure development. Recent community efforts, including the Cannon Riverwalk, have worked to better integrate the river into the community; its scenic beauty and recreational possibilities afford the possibility for further integration of the river into the community. The Greater Northfield Area Greenway System Action Plan is an important resource in helping with this integration.

Rural and Agricultural Heritage: Northfield is located within an area of small farms connected by rural roads. Agriculture has played a significant role in the historical development of the community and continues to contribute to the city's economy, character, and identity. Distinct edges or borders where the city meets the rural landscape have eroded in some areas of the community. Adherence to the land use principles in

Chapter 4 and associated ordinances will offer protection of the rural edges.

Rail Connection: The railroad was a key force that shaped the development of the community. Remnants of the railroad include the historic depot and grain elevators. Malt-O-Meal and other local industry continue to use the rail line today. Both the history and the potential future of rail are key identity elements.

Well-defined Historic Downtown: Division Street ("Main Street") is the foundation of the downtown core. The streetscape provides a pedestrian-friendly environment with wide sidewalks, well-defined public spaces, active storefronts, benches, and multi-use buildings that frame the street. The physical environment and downtown buildings are well-preserved, adding to the community's small town character and identity. However, the downtown is not without its challenges, the most significant being better integration of the Cannon River and improvements to make the area more pedestrian-friendly.

Unique Character of the Built Environment: Northfield has a reputation as a community with historic structures containing unique architectural elements of the community in the downtown and older neighborhoods. A 1999 book called "Northfield: The History and Architecture of a Community" has an inventory of homes, churches and college-related buildings in these neighborhoods. These structures are sited with minimal setbacks which creates a vibrant streetscape. Modern commercial and residential structures constructed within the last 30 years are characterized by franchise architecture, which fails to strengthen the community's small town character. Unlike the downtown, these commercial structures are defined by large parking areas usually located between the building front and the street.

Divergent Development Pattern: The development pattern over the last 30 years has put the small town character of the community at risk (See Figure 3.1). Typical recent development no longer follows the traditional street and lot and block pattern of the original grid network. New development has occurred that is built around wide streets, deep setbacks and a curvilinear road network. This changing development pattern has created pockets that do not reflect the traditional

development pattern found in the downtown and older historic neighborhoods that are part of the foundation for the community's identity. If this anomalous development pattern continues, Northfield's distinctive sense of place could be at risk.

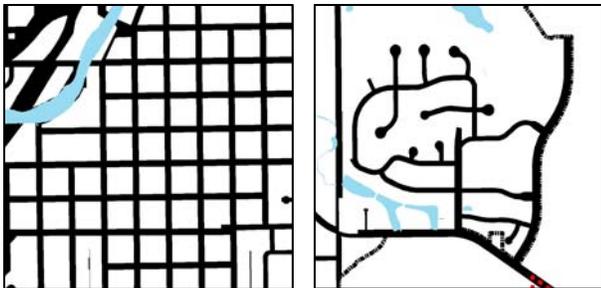


Figure 3.1. Left: A traditional street pattern that makes up the downtown and older neighborhoods. Right: Newer, curvilinear subdivisions that do not reflect the traditional elements of Northfield, which creates part of the local identity.

Inconsistent Community Gateways: Northfield's "gateways", or points of entrance into the community, are not cohesive and do not reflect Northfield's character (See Figure 3.2). The north-south gateways along Hwy 3 are characterized by conventional suburban-style highway development, which does not offer a feeling of entrance into a place. The east-west entrances to the community on Hwy 19 through the college campuses provide a more defined entrance. These first impressions as one enters the community have lasting effects. Currently, these gateways are not cohesive and do not reflect Northfield's character, especially the approach on Hwy 3 (See Figure 3.2).

Functional Public Spaces: Public spaces are important identity elements because they help foster a sense of place by serving as day-to-day gathering areas for residents. Northfield has a variety of churches, schools, community buildings, parks, public plazas, sidewalks, and streets that serve as public spaces. The historic areas of the community, including downtown and the older residential neighborhoods, have attractive public realms created through the placement of structures and well-defined pedestrian environments. The design and location of public places are important decisions that enhance or detract from Northfield's distinctiveness. These areas are especially important to Northfield's identity as they host a variety of public events and festivals.

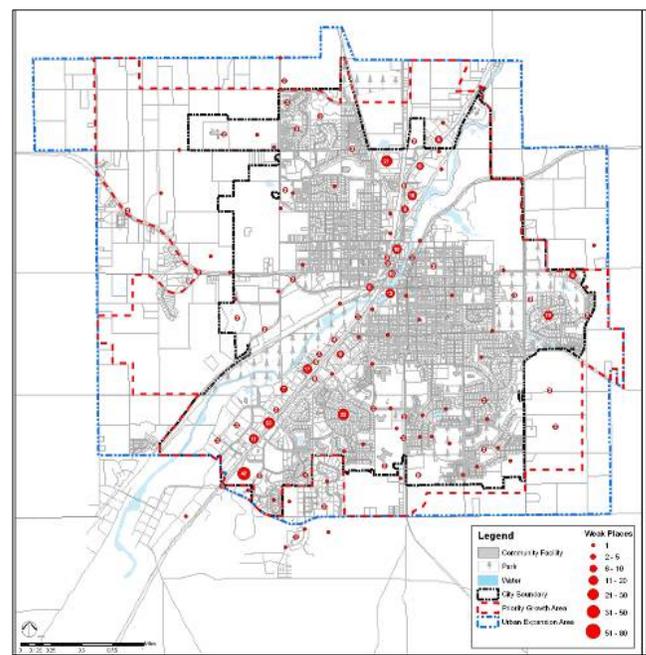


Figure 3.2 This map shows the weak places in the community, as created by the public during the public meetings held in April 2007, and reflects the need to improve the north and south entryways on Hwy 3.

Influence of Arts and Culture: An important aspect of Northfield's identity is its social capital: an unusually high percentage of people supporting, creating, or teaching arts and culture, and wide community participation in the visual and performing arts. The rich artistic and cultural activities are a "community draw" making the community an enjoyable, stimulating destination for tourists, as well as a highly desirable place in which to raise a family, work, and retire. Currently, the potential for public art has not been achieved, and the arts and culture programs are lacking a central hub or physical space to bring them together.

Value Placed on Education: Northfield is recognized for its educational institutions: well regarded public schools, private and charter school options, and its two nationally recognized liberal arts colleges. The community has consistently supported the school system in its effort to provide rich educational programs and appropriate facilities. The presence of both colleges enhances the local school system but also the general richness of community life. Contributions to the community include beautiful buildings and campuses, and cultural events and facilities that are often open to the public. The colleges also contribute through the participation of their students, faculty and staff in community life. The campuses are excellent examples of pedestrian-friendly environments and use of open space.

Their proximity to downtown and the sizable student population give Northfield a “College Town” feel. A strong relationship between the City, schools, and colleges will continue to be an essential element of Northfield’s identity.

D. Objectives and Strategies

Outlined below are seven objectives and 33 strategies. The objectives indicate a specific policy direction and help organize strategies, while the strategies are detailed actions necessary to initiate or complete an objective such as a program, policy or a project.

Objective 1: Continue to preserve Northfield’s rural heritage.

CI 1.1 Preserve the scenic quality of the rural landscape by defining the edge of the community and maintain the rural character of roadways on the edges of the community.

CI 1.2 Preserve, protect, and enhance rural heritage preservation sites in collaboration with surrounding jurisdictions.

CI 1.3 Support small-scale, farm-to-table programs (such as a farmers’ market) to promote the health of the local agricultural economy.

CI 1.4 Ensure that all development, redevelopment and expansion be compatible with the desirable features of the natural and man-made environment.

Objective 2: Strengthen downtown as an historical and cultural center of the community.

CI 2.1 Maintain and enhance existing public spaces and create new public gathering places for social interaction.

CI 2.2 Identify strategic locations to more effectively integrate the Cannon River into the fabric of the downtown, while also protecting its environmental quality and enhancing its visual appearance.

CI 2.3 Create new educational, artistic, cultural and recreational activities along the Cannon River in and around the downtown.

CI 2.4 Identify and designate an arts and cultural district in the downtown.

CI 2.5 Support existing and new local businesses that provide dining, retail, arts and entertainment.

Objective 3: Preserve historic sites and structures.

CI 3.1 Work with the Northfield Heritage Preservation Commission to create a priority list for designating buildings (those that aren’t already listed), structures and districts on local, state and or national historic registers.

CI 3.2 Provide economic incentives and design flexibility to aid in the restoration and long term economic vitality of historically significant buildings in the Downtown.

CI 3.3 Consider becoming an officially designated Mainstreet program by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, or incorporating Mainstreet’s principles into existing economic development, historic preservation, or community planning programs.

CI 3.4 Cooperate with appropriate community groups, such as the Northfield Historical Society, in protecting and enhancing structures in the historic neighborhoods, and improving the general appearance of these areas.

Objective 4: Encourage a traditional development pattern.

CI 4.1 Guide new development to be compatible with, and/or expand on the existing grid network (see Figure 3.3).



Figure 3.3. Left: A conventional subdivision pattern in Northfield showing a disjointed road network. Right: The traditional neighborhood pattern found in the Neighborhood General Zone.

CI 4.2 Provide for a mix of uses to create new neighborhood centers as new development occurs (see Figure 4.6 in Chapter 4).

CI 4.3 Ensure new development provides for areas that contribute to the public realm, such as plazas and other public gathering places.

CI 4.4 Require new neighborhoods to create neighborhood scaled streets, with street trees and sidewalks (see Figure 4.4 in Chapter 4).

CI 4.5 Regulate the placement of buildings onsite by regulating short front yard setbacks to orient buildings to the street/public realm (see Figure 4.4 in Chapter 4).

CI 4.6 Encourage architectural styles and scales that contain a relationship to the overall community identity.

Objective 5: Improve the entry points (gateways) into the community.

CI 5.1 Create gateways at the north and south Hwy 3 entryways near the city limits.

CI 5.2 When appropriate, include attractive landscaping and public art at identified gateways.

CI 5.3 Modify the overlying zoning districts at targeted gateways to create a defined streetscape with building fronts oriented to the street and parking to the rear of the structure.

CI 5.4 Work with the State transportation department to implement traffic calming techniques and pedestrian-friendly crossings on Hwy 3 and Hwy 19.

Objective 6: Continue to host and sponsor local arts and cultural activities and festivals.

CI 6.1 Develop initiatives in collaboration with the Arts and Culture Commission to promote the arts and cultural qualities of Northfield.

CI 6.2 Solicit input from members of the local design community when building or renovating public facilities to enhance the quality of these facilities and grounds.

CI 6.3 Create opportunities, in collaboration with local students and Northfield arts organizations, for the public to contribute to sense of place (e.g., public art, landscaping, and outdoor activity areas).

CI 6.4 Create a community seal to be used in a wide range of public improvements.

CI 6.5 Explore regulations to implement a “percent-for-arts” requirement in community funded projects.

CI 6.6 Develop an “artist in residence” program in the public works department.

CI 6.7 Incorporate public art into the design of existing public places including community buildings and infrastructure.

Objective 7: Continue to support local schools and colleges.

CI 7.1 Coordinate with the school district on population growth and residential development trends in order to reserve sites for future school facilities as population growth may require.

CI 7.2 Cooperate with the local colleges to minimize negative impacts of parking and traffic on Northfield neighborhoods.

CI 7.3 Collaborate with the local colleges to provide the overall community with quality public programs, and quality open spaces.