

## Draft - NEOO Engagement Summary Write-Up for Visioning Phase

### Executive Summary

From February - April 2024, NEOO worked with the City of Northfield and Stantec to gather input and feedback on the vision statement and guiding values for the City's 2045 Comprehensive Plan. This is the second phase of engagement with community members in Northfield building off the several months of engagement completed in 2023 during the Discovery Phase of the plan. The overarching goal of the public engagement efforts for the City of Northfield is to build meaningful relationships in the community while gathering stakeholder and public input, respond to comments and concerns; understand the problems that need to be solved; and keep decision-makers and other stakeholders informed throughout the process.

During this phase of engagement, NEOO engaged with approximately 60 individuals (not including the survey, acknowledging that those who provided feedback during popups and the kickoff meeting may also have taken the survey) at the following events.

#### Pop-Up Events

1. February 22, 2024: The Key
2. February 23, 2024: Northfield Community Resource Center

#### Canvassing Engagement

1. February 23, 2024: Viking Terrace

#### Comp Plan Presentations

1. February 7, 2024: Heritage Preservation Commission
2. February 26, 2024: Friends of Downtown Northfield
3. February 26, 2024: Economic Development Authority
4. February 29, 2024: Human Rights Commission

#### Focused Conversation

1. March 14, 2024: Laura Baker Services Association

### Key Themes

- From the survey, respondents agree that Northfield is currently a sustainable and resilient community. Some view it as a diverse and equitable place to live. **The leading value respondents have for the 2045 Comprehensive Plan is to leverage Northfield's unique identity, this was strongly echoed throughout the other engagement activities.** Other key values for the plan include inclusivity, innovation, and both economic and environmental sustainability.
- From our engagement, themes emerged from the 'pie-in-the-sky' activity that describes the vision residents have for the future of Northfield. We heard desires for Northfield to **retain its unique identity and charm that honors its rich history even amidst growth**, to become **more**

**connected within the city, to neighboring areas, and to the Twin Cities, and to become a destination leveraging their cultural assets, annual events, sports tournaments, and Cannon River.** It is important for the **community to grow together through unity, and to not create division** about how Northfield grows.

- Engagement with the various commissions provided many insights about economic development. Consensus around broadening the tax base to reduce the burden on residential property owners is clear. **Plans and investment from the City for balanced, smart, and sustainable growth are needed for successful public-private partnerships to raise funds and attract investment.** Solving issues about providing jobs and building housing to support employees are challenging plans to put into action but it needs to be done. **Many insights point to the importance of supporting entrepreneurs, and both existing and new small businesses in Northfield.** Across the board, restaurants, retail shops, and sports entertainment activities are desired to boost economic activity.
- Generally, residents believe that **the natural environment, greenspace, landscaping, and parks will play a significant role in making Northfield feel welcoming and inviting.** Having equitable access to parks and recreational activities will help facilitate greater community connections. This looks like **free and accessible indoor and outdoor recreational spaces.** This includes activating public spaces for arts, cultural, and entertainment-related events.
- The insights received from the community members with disabilities or parents and caregivers of someone with a disability identified several challenges related to employment opportunities, housing availability and affordability, and transportation needs. **Prioritizing creative solutions to address fostering more work opportunities for people with disabilities in Northfield was strongly desired.**
- Several examples of what **inclusive recreational facilities** look like were provided and they include more than the current standard allotment of handicap parking spots, benches, shading, improved pathway transitions for people with walking devices, gender-neutral family restrooms, and signage design considerations for people with low vision.
- **Community members expressed great interest in having Northfield become affordable again,** right now many people shared that property taxes are too high, home prices are impacting the attainability of homeownership for some, and there is a need to preserve the existing housing stock and develop intentional mixed-income communities. Others shared there are **challenges with downsizing from their current homes because there is no financial benefit or incentive** for them to do so because of rising home prices.
- **A reliable and well-connected transportation system is strongly desired.** Consistent and expanded service hours, better-connected routes and bus stops, and hiring more drivers to get residents across town but also to neighboring cities is needed. Community members are well aware of the significant connection between reliable public transportation and stable employment. **Alternative transportation options that were shared during engagement included micro-transit and bike rideshares** that are either free or subsidized for low-income community members.
- Residents support Northfield in doing their fair share of planning for climate change but the City should balance plans with the affordability and benefits of plans for residents. **The City is**

**encouraged to engage with the neighboring farming communities about their concerns about climate change.**

- Residents are very interested in **preserving and improving the walkability of Northfield**. They would like to see improved infrastructure for sidewalks (connectivity and accessibility), path sharing for pedestrians and bikers, and traffic management for safer crossing specifically across Highway 3.

### **Summary of Engagement Plan**

During the Visioning Phase, engagement efforts were centered on delivering presentations about the 2045 Comprehensive Plan to various boards and commissions and conducting targeted engagement to reach specific populations in Northfield that were missed during the Discovery Phase. Together, NEOO and Northfield Staff completed various engagement activities including canvassing, pop-up events, presentations, and a focused conversation.

NEOO developed a focused conversation guide as an exercise to gather information about aspirational goals and visions people have about the future of Northfield, including discussions about people's pie-in-the-sky vision for the City of Northfield. Conversations were had about where investment should be prioritized and what is most important to them. Additional questions served to gain insights about whether increasing investment around Cannon River and the Historic Downtown, growing towards more density, and making streets safer and more accessible are still priorities for the community in 2024.

Canvassing and pop-up event locations were selected to prioritize going into stakeholder communities that are generally hard to reach or may not readily attend. Two engagement pop ups were held at The Key, an after-school activity center geared towards youth ages 11-21, and the Northfield Community Resources Center, a community resource center where organizations such as Oasis and community resources are located. The target audiences for these pop ups included youth, elders and users of the center's resources. Each pop consisted of large display boards with information about the project and a QR code for the project's survey. In addition a large aerial map was provided to solicit additional comments related to transportation and geographic specific improvements. Additional door knocking and canvassing was completed to spread awareness of the project's survey. In Partnership with Northfield staff, we doorknocked and canvassed the Viking Terrace community, a predominantly spanish speaking community. With the help of city staff who also provided translation services, we were able to knock on approximately 40-50 doors to spread awareness of the project's survey.

For the focused group conversation, we partnered with staff from the Laura Baker Services center. The primary audience was those who identify as having a disability or are a caretaker of someone with a disability. The conversation was facilitated using a question guide that consisted of 18 questions divided by topics such as housing, transportation, sustainability, parks and recreation and economic development. A total of twenty residents participated and were provided \$25 dollar gift cards for their participation.

## **Summary of Pop-Up Events**

NEOO held two pop-up events at local community organizations to engage a diverse group of community members in Northfield. At each pop-up event, participants were asked a series of questions to understand where residents feel unsafe in Northfield as pedestrians or bicyclists, and whether they have suggestions about the type of transportation improvements they would like to see in the city. Additionally, they were asked if there were things that they desired or felt were missing in Northfield.

### **February 22, 2024: The Key Pop-Up Event**

The Key is a youth center that is managed by the Northfield Union of Youth. Youth develop the programming and policies that govern the youth center as well as interview and approve all hires. Three staff and eleven youth were available between middle school and recent high school graduate age. Five youth completed surveys while others provided handwritten comments on sticky notes on the aerial map that was provided.

Youth engaged at this event shared the following insights:

- There is a desire to have more entertainment activities like a roller rink, and a place like Action City that has trampolines, go-karts, arcade games etc.
- An improved transportation system is desired, interested in more bus stops, micro-transit, and/or bike rentals with a subsidy or for free for in-town transportation needs.
- More restaurants and options for food - i.e. pizza.
- Concerning housing, comments were shared about the need for affordable housing and homeless shelters.
- Activation at Fountain Bridge Square
- Prioritize investment near schools before downtown investments.
- A desire for retail stores like a family video store, music store, and Walmart.

### **February 23, 2024: Northfield Community Resource Center**

People engaged at this event shared the following insights:

- Invest in Northfield Middle School.
- Desire to see improved traffic management like roundabouts at trouble intersections.
- A new and updated skate park, that has improved lighting, and a water fountain.
- The lack of improvements to Highway 3 is deterring the desirability of buying real estate in the NE area of the city.

## **Summary of Canvassing Engagement**

**February 23, 2024: Viking Terrace Canvass** - an all-ages mobile home park in Northfield

NEOO staff collaborated with Northfield staff and translator Claudia Garcia to doorknock and canvas the Viking Terrace community. A majority of the residents contacted were Spanish speaking and required translation services. For the homes where no contact was made, small postcard sized flyers with a QR code linked to the survey were left behind. No additional comments were collected.

### **Summary of Staff Presentations to Boards and Commissions**

The city's Community Development Director Jake Riley, provided several presentations during this visioning phase on the 2045 Comprehensive Plan to the following advisory boards and commissions in Northfield to gather their feedback and input on the plan's development. At each presentation, an overview of what a comprehensive plan is and the current engagement activities was provided in addition to a facilitated discussion through exercises to understand aspirational goals and visions these members have about the future of Northfield. The following themes emerged from the presentations providing a variety of perspectives and insights that are meaningful in the engagement work for the plan.

#### **February 7, 2024: Heritage Preservation Commission - 7 people engaged**

The Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) is comprised of members who live in Northfield representing a variety of professions in real estate, architecture, and education, even including a youth member from the community.

When asked about a newspaper headline that describes their 'pie-in-the-sky' vision for Northfield, HPC members shared they would like to see:

- The city's tradition of honoring Northfield's rich history to continue.
- Northfield's growth is guided by a reflective consideration of its past - "Come to Northfield, history is our future"
- Northfield to preserve the traditions that define Northfield's cultural identity.
- Northfield to become a welcoming and inviting place for visitors and prospective residents.
- Northfield to be different from its neighboring communities and resist urban sprawl.

When asked about what major areas they would like the City to invest in and whether the 2008 plan still resonates today, members shared:

- More investment in downtown, desire to see more restaurants and retail to increase foot traffic and economic activity.
- Be cautious about increased density, especially downtown, some want it and some don't.
- Invest in preserving the existing housing stock.
- Have certain neighborhoods get a historic designation.
- Preserve walkability, especially to downtown.

To understand how people feel when they are in Northfield and whether public spaces meet the community's needs, members were asked to share what they like about Northfield and what they think is missing, if anything.

- Urges the city to be cautious about decentralized commercial areas.
- The city should increase support for small businesses and invest in facade improvement programs to help businesses improve their buildings.
- Key institutions and organizations (the library, arts guild, historical museum, and Post Office) in downtown make Northfield feel inviting and maintain foot traffic.
- Improved public amenities (both indoor and outdoor) are necessary to facilitate community connections.
- Greenspace, landscaping, parks, and playgrounds can make Northfield feel more welcoming.
- Improved crossing of Highway 3 for bikers and pedestrians.
- Improved transportation and bike networks.
- Investments in improved street lighting.

#### **February 26, 2024: Friends of Downtown Northfield - 10 people engaged**

The Friends of Downtown Northfield is comprised of members who live in Northfield, some were born and raised in Northfield and others moved here for the small-town charm. Members represent a variety of experiences and professions including real estate, entrepreneurship, commercial property owners, local library staff, and a youth member from the community. Many members have direct experience with owning small businesses and have an interest in downtown Northfield.

When asked about a newspaper headline that describes their 'pie-in-the-sky' vision for Northfield, members shared they would like to see:

- Northfield eliminates parking lots along the river and implements bike lanes without contention.
- Amidst decades of growth and change, Northfield successfully retains its unique identity and charming downtown.
- A commuter rail stop from Northfield to the Twin Cities is developed.
- Property taxes are at a historic low and homeownership is attainable.
- The growth of industry in Northfield eases the tax burden on residents
- Abundant affordable housing, sustainable infrastructure, and broadband connectivity.
- Northfield to become a cultural and charming destination for sports tournaments and annual events along Cannon River.

There weren't many comments from this group about major areas they would like the City to invest in and whether the 2008 plan still resonates today. Comments included that the 2008 Comprehensive Plan generally resonates with some and reflects current daily life. Potential investments could be made in riverfront enhancements like dam removal.

To understand how people feel when they are in Northfield and whether public spaces meet the community's needs, members were asked to share what they like about Northfield. Most had suggestions for what they think is missing including:

- Bringing new industry into Northfield for better jobs for a growing local economy.
- Affordable housing, potentially manufactured housing.
- Attract more restaurants and retail spaces.
- Become a hub for cycling in SE Minnesota, leverage natural resources and spaces as assets.
- Traffic safety and management along Highway 3.

### **February 26, 2024: Economic Development Authority - 8 people engaged**

The Economic Development Authority (EDA) is comprised of members who live, work, or go to school in Northfield and have a shared interest in improving the local economy. When asked about a newspaper headline that describes their 'pie-in-the-sky' vision for Northfield, members shared they would like to see:

- A commuter rail stop from Northfield to the Twin Cities is developed.
- Northfield becomes a walkable paradise due to a temporary moratorium on single-family homes.
- Northfield thrives as a cultural mecca thanks to affordable housing, great jobs, sustainable infrastructure, and continuing investment in cultural assets
- Northfield to become the most popular town in MN, a place where young families want to live.
- The Cannon River is swimmable again and smells good
- Northfield is a thriving place where businesses succeed.

When asked about strategies to meet the goals in the 2006 Economic Development Strategy adopted by the EDA to grow and diversify the tax base, members shared what that could look like to them.

- Diversifying the types of businesses in Northfield is essential, support and development of entrepreneurs is needed and has not been achieved yet.
- Expand agricultural production of different products to support small agricultural businesses.
- Recruitment of both industrial and commercial businesses.
- Troubleshoot why it's harder to work with the City of Northfield to do business than in other cities.
- Smart, sustainable, and balanced growth and development are needed. Where can businesses grow? Ex: on-site, infill elsewhere, or in a new location?
- Marketing and attracting people to live here is how Northfield can diversify and grow its tax base.
- Incorporate in plans on ways to leverage workforce development for young adults and recent grads.
- Create a center of gravity in Northfield that leverages the town's unique identity and vibe.
- Strategies at the intersection of workforce development and housing are needed.
- Tangible strategy to increase affordable housing options.

- For successful public/private partnerships and to raise funds from business and industry, the city must invest first and then make the ask.

### **February 29, 2024: Human Rights Commission - 9 people engaged**

The Human Rights Commission (HRC) is comprised of members who live in Northfield. Members represent a variety of experiences and professions including social work, education, planning and zoning in rural communities, community organizing, and service to other boards like the Park and Recreation Board. At this meeting, there was a need to have the presentation translated into Spanish for language accessibility.

When asked about a newspaper headline that describes their ‘pie-in-the-sky’ vision for Northfield, members shared they would like to see:

- Northfield is named one of the ten most liveable cities in MN, even the U.S.
- Transportation access and a grocery store come to the NW Sector of Northfield.
- Northfield to have the lowest crime and the best schools.
- Northfield is a place where everyone is “okay” and has a chance to flourish.
- Northfield shares its framework for success with other cities.
- Where progress keeps the community united, doesn’t divide the community.
- Collaboration with surrounding farming townships to ensure food supply for its growing population.

When asked about what major areas they would like the City to invest in and whether the 2008 plan still resonates today, members shared:

- Making Northfield more of a destination, by leveraging the river.
- Improved bridge square with a stage to promote arts and culture, particularly to engage youth.
- Job creation
- Improved transportation infrastructure
- Bring more commerce and retail stores to the community.

HRC members were asked about their feelings about current housing and job opportunities and whether they meet their needs and allow them to sustain their lives. If not, they were asked what would help them better meet their needs. Members shared some things that haven't changed in 30 – 40 years and they should have when it comes to transportation and safety on Highway 3. Additionally, they shared Northfield needs better paying jobs but to be cautious of what jobs they bring here and the resources they may require of the town, specifically regarding environmental sustainability and water resources.

### **Summary of Focused Conversation**

### **March 14, 2024 - Laura Baker Services Association Focused Conversation - 20 people engaged**



NEOO and staff members of Laura Baker Services Association (LBSA), a disability services provider that works with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families, coordinated a focused conversation about the 2045 Comprehensive Plan. The event was held at LSBA from 4-5:30 pm and 20 people attended, which included residents and staff from LSBA, people with disabilities, people who care for people with disabilities in their family, seniors, and other Northfield community members. Attendees were provided a meal from a locally-owned business and were offered a \$25 gift card for their participation.

For the first 30 minutes, attendees were able to sign in, grab refreshments, take the visioning and values survey, and participate in the mapping activity to identify areas, streets, and intersections that they find hard to walk as a pedestrian, are an unsafe intersection, or have issues with accessibility and unsafe sidewalks. Participants were encouraged to take a couple of project postcards to share with family and friends to fill out the survey. The remaining hour was dedicated to open dialogue as a large group to talk about areas they would like to see the City invest in and a series of questions about their experiences with housing, sustainability, transportation, economic development, and parks and recreations in Northfield.

Only one participant engaged in the mapping activity and shared that the city has more than enough bike lanes. As a result of the facilitated discussion, the following themes were shared with NEOO about challenges and issues that exist particularly for people with disabilities, their caregivers, those with mobility issues, and seniors in navigating and sustaining their livelihoods in Northfield.

**Housing Accessibility and Affordability:**

- There is a need for supportive housing for people with disabilities.
- Participants expressed interest in having housing availability information located in a central place when exploring new housing. Particularly so available units/homes can disclose whether it is handicap accessible.
- There is a lack of affordable housing options, especially for lower-income and disabled people. Particularly, participants expressed concern about the inflexibility of income eligibility for subsidized housing. While it is understood this is beyond local control, it's an issue worth highlighting.
- Difficulty in downsizing homes is an issue, there is no financial benefit for someone who has paid off their home to downsize when prices for something smaller are the value of their current home.
- There is a desire for developing mixed-income communities, not planning for concentrated areas of low-income and affordable housing.
- There is not enough affordable housing in the most walkable areas of the city.

**Sustainability and Climate Action:**

- Participants would like Northfield to do its share of planning for climate change.
- The City should engage neighboring farming communities in the discussion about climate change.

- Climate and sustainability solutions need to be affordable, accessible, and benefit residents.
- Improving public transportation is desired to make residents less reliant on their cars.

#### **Transportation Challenges and Accessibility:**

- There are limited public transit service hours, routes, and drivers - participants would like a more robust and reliable transportation system.
- There is a need for new and more accessible sidewalks to protect pedestrians.
- Safety concerns regarding path sharing for pedestrians and bikers.
- Desire for faster and more frequent transit service
- There are challenges for disabled individuals in accessing employment due to transportation limitations.
- Participants would like to be connected to neighboring cities via public transportation.

#### **Economic Development, Employment and Disability Inclusion:**

- More businesses are needed to broaden the tax base.
- More support is needed for small businesses and entrepreneurs.
- A desire for more collaboration between the city and colleges to support fair taxation and economic development.
- Building a Hockey Arena would bring entertainment and economic activity to Northfield.
- There are significant challenges for disabled individuals in finding employment.
- Small businesses are more likely to support employing people with disabilities.
- Resources needed for employment support navigators.
- Desire for collaboration between the city and large employers for job creation
- Internet access is lacking and is necessary.

#### **Parks and Recreation Accessibility:**

- Equitable access to parks and recreational activities across Northfield, free indoor recreation spaces desired.
- Desire for more inclusive recreational spaces and facilities - i.e. accessible parking spots, benches, shading, improved pathway transitions for people with walking devices, family restrooms that are gender neutral, and signage design considerations for people with low vision.
- Invest in splash pads for non-swimmers at parks.

#### **Community Engagement and Transparency:**

- Desire for greater transparency in city decision-making.
- Need for inclusive community engagement in city planning.
- Call for accountability and follow-through on community needs and desires.
- Importance of balancing community needs with city resources.

#### **Survey Results - 24 respondents engaged**

An online survey was created to engage the broader community in Northfield about what vision and values should guide the City's 2045 Comprehensive Plan. Project postcards were created with the survey's QR code link pictured to help stakeholders learn about the project, encourage them to take the survey, and share it with others. The survey asked community members a variety of questions to understand their perception of Northfield's current values and vision statement, feedback on the Planning Commission vision statement, and what their desired guiding values are for the plan moving forward. A total of 24 surveys were collected over 6 weeks, no demographic data was collected from the survey besides name and contact information. As an incentive, survey respondents had the opportunity to win a \$25 gift card to a local coffee shop.

Questions about the vision and value statements were ranked on a scale from 1-5 for participants to register their level of agreement with the questions posed with 1 meaning a respondent highly disagrees with the statement or value, 3 being neutral, and 5 indicating that a respondent highly agrees with a statement or value. Survey results from these statements utilize the weighted average of their rankings by respondents, values attributed to subsequent statements indicate the level of favorability on a scale of 1-5.

When asked about a respondent's perspective on whether Northfield is known for being diverse, sustainable, resilient, and/or a great place to live because it has equitable access for everyone, the majority of respondents agreed that Northfield is known for being a sustainable (3.83) and resilient (3.70) community first and foremost. Following those two statements, respondents believe that Northfield is known as a diverse (3.5) community and then an equitable (3.42) place to live. Statements about Northfield being diverse and equitable received the most neutral and comments of disagreement from respondents are likely because respondents shared that access to affordable housing is challenging and that disabled community members need better access to housing, transportation, and employment opportunities.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed with the following vision statement by the Planning Commission:

*"We recognize that past actions have created disparities in access to housing, services, and recreation for our neighborhoods. Instead, we will work to meet these needs in every part of the city while fostering human connections in our increasingly diverse community."*

Only 17 respondents answered this question, 10 agreed favorably to the vision statement and 3 disagreed with the statement. When asked what was missing from the statement respondents wrote in a desire for improved safety infrastructure (i.e. sidewalks), equitable employment opportunities, and addressing housing needs for the disabled community. A couple of respondents registered confusion with the structure of the statement (specifically with the use of "instead") and whether past actions have actually caused disparities in Northfield. This indicates there might not be broad awareness of historical inequitable practices whether in planning or policies that have led to current disparities in Northfield.

To understand where priorities lie for guiding values for the plan, survey respondents were asked to rank their level of agreement with 9 proposed guiding values for the 2045 Comprehensive Plan. The values ranked as follows:

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|--|--|
| 1. Identity - (3.96)                     | 6. Connections/Social Sustainability - (3.3) |
| 2. Inclusivity - (3.7)                   | 7. Equity - (3.22)                           |
| 3. Innovation - (3.57)                   | 8. Mobility - (3.17)                         |
| 4. Economic Sustainability - (3.52)      | 9. Housing - (3.16)                          |
| 5. Environmental Sustainability - (3.52) |  |

When asked for an explanation for strongly disagreeing with any of the guiding value statements, two respondents shared that housing for people with disabilities is challenging and that city leadership is reluctant to talk about real solutions to difficult issues, specifically around inclusion, and believes that they are unamenable to dissent from the community. Additionally, respondents were asked why they strongly agree with certain guiding values and they shared that the strength of the town and its historical value make Northfield unique. There is a desire to ensure jobs can allow residents to have economic stability and that equity, inclusivity, and housing are needed for all income levels to make this a community people want to live in.

To close out the survey, respondents were asked to share any missing elements to the proposed guiding values for the 2045 Comprehensive Plan. One respondent registered that safety and responsibility are important values for this community and another stated that the housing value should be inclusive of improved shelter options for homeless individuals demonstrating that there should be sufficient housing options available for community members in all stages of life, even if they may be unhoused.