

Athens City Comprehensive Plan Visioning Session Transcriptions

Meeting Date: September 21, 2017

This kickoff event for the comprehensive plan update was designed to get the collected knowledge and thoughts of attendees in an efficient period of time. The meeting was attended by 75 people.

Participants were asked at sign-in to describe Athens in 3 words. These words were then put into a word cloud generator to see which words are the most common. The wordcloud can be viewed here:

<http://www.ci.athens.oh.us/DocumentCenter/View/4222>

As the meeting ended participants were asked a final question “describe in 3 words what could Athens be in 20 years”. A summary word cloud of that exercise can be viewed here: <http://www.ci.athens.oh.us/DocumentCenter/View/4228>

While sitting at round tables, participants were asked 3 questions, each question given 20 minutes to discuss. Participants were given pens, markers, and note pads and asked to go around their table and let each person give one response to the question and then continue in this manner until time expired. The notes (bulleted and verbatim below) were then collected and sorted into themes.

Question 1 --What do you think Athens should look like in 20 years?

SMART GROWTH CONNECTING INNOVATION + HISTORY

I. DEVELOPMENT

- A. The Ridges redeveloped as mixed-use that honors historic context
- B. Focus on local, smaller, neighborhood development
 - More smaller commercial areas. Places to eat, walk, browse, bike to. (Court Street is for the students)
 - Maintain/improve local economy
 - Improve small business environment. Strengthen locally owned business suggests fair and equitable treatment for all
 - Vibrant local economy
 - No big box stores
 - Attraction of business and employment opportunity
 - Multiple main employers
 - A place of opportunity beyond OU
 - More business expansion
 - Meaningful support of small business
 - Neighborhood schools

- Small neighborhood schools with well established neighborhoods
- Viewed as the regional medical hub and children's hospital. More specialists
- Green/food enterprise
- Public spaces with places to sit.

II. INNOVATION CONNECTING HISTORY, ARTS, HEALTH, ENERGY, DESIGN

- More creative innovations with the coal history of Athens
- Smart, intentional growth
- Balance of history with innovative development and art
- Universal design
- Stable, healthy university
- Intellectual community and Appalachian population are not just co-existing
 - Keep character of uptown intact (bricks, historic buildings)
 - Court street, time-based pedestrian mall
 - More city education
 - More gathering places besides bars
 - More outdoor seating at restaurants
 - Innovative: maintaining character but be forward-thinking and take advantage of new opportunities/economic development
 - Aspects that are still the same underneath: inside buildings -vibrant- innovative. outside elements: trees, bricks, character same
 - Evidence of the Essence of Athens
 - Proactive implementation

III. ENERGY

- Charging stations for EV (electric vehicles)
- Model for sustainable energy
- Sustainable: energy, transportation, food culture
- Charging infrastructure
- Solar friendly (with tree friendly thinking)
- Encourage more renewable energy. Ease restrictions?
- Pursue LEED for cities certification
- Renewable energy-- solar panels, co-ops to lower prices, Upgrade Athens resources
- Upgrade infrastructure to handle renewable
- Approach 100% renewable energy

IV. INFRASTRUCTURE

- A closed sewer system
- High speed internet for all
- Systematically improve existing infrastructure (streets, utilities, sidewalks). Prioritize this over new projects (which will add to long-term O&M)
- Be resilient to the impacts of climate change (floods, rising temps, severe weather, etc.)
- Tidy, cleaner streets and sidewalks

V. GREENSPACES:

- Pedestrian friendly
- Expand core-area landscape/features to the develop city edge zone, e.g., sidewalks (E. State, Rock Riffle, W. Union St., etc.)
- Keep green spaces. Ensure 40% tree coverage is met
- Trees shaping the human environment (e.g., shade over sidewalks)
- Tree covered
- More trees
- More trees and green spaces, public and private.
- Pocket parks uptown
- Preserving our natural environment (trees, history, lakes)
- Preserve wildlife habitat and open space
- Intentional parks and integration with vibrancy
- Outdoor areas at river, restaurants, parks, in streets.
- More green and pop up parks on Court
- Greener. Tree canopy
- Preserving family space – residential and recreation as well as academic facilities (high, middle, and elementary schools)
- Outdoor activity spaces: Eating, performance, etc.

VI. TRANSPORTATION:

- Safe roadways for biking
- Bike friendly-er
- Maximize bike friendliness
- Bikeways
- Bike and walking facilities, but not TOO much. Overkill on bike lanes?
- Bikes
- Active transportation
- More people using different modes of transportation
- Move cars out, people in
- Pedestrian buffers to streets. Less car centered
- Continue strong environmental presence and make our city functional by walking and biking
- Connectivity of bike and pedestrian routes
- Connected transportation (safe sidewalks, bikeways, buses)
- Improved/limited ingress and egress on East State Street

- A more pedestrian friendly East State Street: Crosswalks, trees, and bike lanes
- Not more parking, but more than car travel. Park & rides, public transit, bicycle infrastructure
- More and more bike friendly
- Public transit
- Enhanced regional/local transportation systems to connect city and county
- Connectivity to Columbus Metro area (self driving cars)
- Connect borders better to central of city. Many streets aren't accessible by bus, bike, walk
- With self-driving cars/trucks, transportation will not be a barrier for employment, healthcare, etc.
- Connected to transit system that reaches further and further and to different spaces

VII. TOURISM

- Rock Local food culture
- Permanent Farmers market space
- Continued Farmers Market
- Tourism destination: ecotourism and other general and specific tourism
- Promote tourism
- More tourism: City decide between more hotels v Air BnB
- Take advantage of our unique place, but provide/have the right amenities to bring economic development and short stay conferences/events
- River beautification, more vegetation
- River walk
- Water trails
- More active river! Play, fish, swim, boat, and see it!
- Make Hocking River more natural. Restore
- Sustain quality of life for people in Athens. Encourage people to live here or just visit
- Continue to use the Essence of Athens to build and encourage arts community
- Improved arts community. Murals? Boxes?
- Public art
- Promote pride in visual environment
- Music venue

VIII. HOUSING

- Affordable housing
- Convert old rentals into owner-occupied homes. Requires seed money? Zoning changes?
- Real estate improvement where single-family homes become more affordable and attractive

- Affordable single-family housing
- Low and moderate income housing for individuals and families
- Affordable housing within the city limits

IX. COLLABORATION

- Trust
- City and community work better together
- Nelsonville/Athens/Athens County – better connection
- Create relationships with outside. the county/city
- Athens city solutions are framed around the county needs and how we are connected
- Sharing economy
- Multi-modal transportation planning/development/ partnership

X. ASPIRATIONAL

- Do Not Accept Mediocrity

XI. EQUITABLE

- A Beacon of Democracy
- Food desserts are no more
- Food security for all
- Strengthen a locally-owned small business environment that promotes equitable wages and benefits for all
- Socio-economically integrated, modernized: school system, neighborhoods, housing
- Inclusive should be the “norm,” not the exception, that people with disabilities are present, participate, and are welcome in the community
- Equity: Socio-economic, cultural
- Community
- Inclusive and welcoming to all. Celebrate diversity
- Accessibility
- Physical accessibility: sidewalks, business with elevators and no step, doors with buttons, HOUSING!!! (ramps, doorknobs)
- More colorful in terms of international people staying beyond their time at Ohio U
- A place that respects all age groups and provides multigenerational housing opportunities
- Even handed, unbiased enforcement of code

XII. SAFE

- Promote safety
- Fire safety uptown

XIII. RESOURCES

- Retirement- local money

- Financial commitment by the university and local government to assist in fulfilling the visions of Athens.

Question 2-- Communities develop and change over time. How should we develop and change for our future?

I. FORWARD FACING

- While I appreciate some people have a romantic, idealized memory of Athens in the 1960s and 70s, or earlier, we aren't ever going to be that city again. Need to move forward, not try to preserve a time gone by.
- Balance positive and negative input that avoids negative backlash after plan is in place
- How can we remain flexible in approaching new ideas and challenges?
- Try to evolve from being conservative progressives to being willing to try new things in our backyards.

II. JOBS/BUSINESS FRIENDLY

- Jobs outside of OU
- Diversity of jobs
- Expand local support beyond food industry
- Support/expand recreation and tourism
- Attract economic activity that creates CLEAN jobs
- The university is the engine that drives Athens, but it will contract eventually (changing high school graduation demographics). The city needs to account for a possible downturn
- City needs to remain a business-friendly environment where jobs can come in. Don't let the NIMBY class become unfriendly to change
- City support/subsidy for small to mid-enterprises, first with OU innovation center then to city
- Work closer to Ohio University research and innovations. More business incubation, shared space and resource center
- Support business incubators
- Emphasis and support of local business
- Support 'new business' develop center similar to the university's
- Grow technology in partnership with university (innovation center, business incubation) share resources
- Change by remaining same: preserve "funky" to drive economic development
- Preferred local vendor
- Sustainable local economy: not just serving and benefitting from OU students, but year-round sustainability
- Help with trailing spouse issues

III. COLLABORATE REGIONALLY

- Collaboration and cooperation among entities--government, private business—with goal of stronger infrastructure
- As the city grows it needs to also help develop the region beyond the city limits and encompass the county
- Work with OU!
 - Work with county
 - City-county collaborations
 - Collaboratively
 - Work with the university to slowly change student culture, so they don't feel like its ok to dump on the city (trash, vandalism, etc.)
 - City/university cooperation in approaching new challenges
 - Integrate more with county so it's less of us vs. them
 - City-OU-Community: We are one. You know 3 will work together to make things happen
 - Neighborhood meetings
 - Student involvement
 - Continued responsive government

IV. CONNECTED

- Stay current with technology to retain youth
- Technology: more broadband out of the city
- Shopping will be more online
- Better broadband = more businesses from home
- Better broadband = can mean locals who come here because they love it can stay and start businesses
- Better broadband = More incentive for local business owners (not big box)
- Technology changes: broadband needs. Shopping on internet, closing of stores
- Develop/embrace opportunities associated with services for a virtual workforce –
- Better connectivity with surrounding region
- Digital connectivity
- City/county WIFI
- More outlying area integrated with the city connectivity options
- Internet access
- Cell service improvement!!
- Internet SPEED!!
- Enhanced connectivity for internet based economic infrastructure
- Prepare for future through technological expansion (fiber optics, city-wide WIFI, encouraging tech industry to come here) Expand city service to prepare for expansion

V. EDUCATION

- Education of how and why (we must change)

VI. EQUITY

- Change to encourage connection and purpose
- Education, lifestyle, and environmental is brought into systems
- Respectfully
- Plan should include individual issues
- Integration: educating public in general and future generations
- Integration: getting into school systems to education children about disabilities, accessibility, integration, and making it the norm
- Form a planning committee that is purposely diverse in backgrounds and employers
- Find ways to speak a common language with those opposed to ideas
- Integrated communities in all functions (more than just houses near each other)

VII. LAND USE

A. INFRASTRUCTURE

- Update zoning ideas
- More mixed use zones
- Mixed use zoning, residential and business
- Improved neighborhood commercial/retail zones/areas (Stimson, West Athens, Richland)
- Redevelop: make areas developed “work” harder
- Pedestrian Mall on Court Street
- City laws are outdated
- Need complete streets policy/new business policies that make them apply complete streets when building
- Flexibility of guidelines and policy, not enforcing poorly written policy for the sake of policy
- Develop opportunities for virtual infrastructure (and other local job opportunities) for partners/spouses of bigger employers
- Infrastructure development: Utilities (water, electric, sewer, storm), System growth, Circulation system designed for future growth needs

B. BUILDING

- Redevelop rather than green field build
- Should the flood plain be evacuated?
- Increase height limit of buildings near the university
- Protect green space
- Development should revolve around the quality of the built and natural environment. Athens best characteristic is the green rolling hills
- Communal gathering spaces: designs that promote interaction (benches that face each other)
- As change happens, balance green space with built environment

- Maintain good balance between green space and build environment

C. HOUSING STOCK

- All forms of affordable housing
- Better housing for all populations
- Better senior living
- More affordable housing stock, make best use of existing housing-rehab, balance of OU housing and community neighborhoods
- Attracting young professionals and have housing options closer to downtown
- Housing accessible to those with disabilities, seniors
- There are many college towns that somehow manage to keep student rentals from turning into rundown, decrepit houses. How can Athens emulate a culture like that?
- More apartment complexes for both students and older residents
- Incentivized programs to repair older houses
- Encourage home ownership with 0% loans at OU Foundation
- Develop the Westside neighborhoods as single family homes and rentals
- Possible tax breaks for homeowners buying a student rental and making it a single family home
- Thorough comprehensive plan, provide opportunity for upgrading housing for families
- Aging in place - balanced neighborhoods

VIII. TRANSPORTATION

- Established bicycle boulevards in neighborhoods with traffic calming and re-design
- Active transportation infrastructure
- Comprehensive bus system, 24/7 throughout the city
- Transportation changes - COAD meetings? Access to ridges? Fort Street? Population growth may affect this?
- Transportation: improved access to public transit, accessible transportation, affordable and eco-friendly
- Expand bus service
- Athens Transit on Demand accessible to more people
- Encourage/support electric bikes (rent, borrow, etc.)

IX. ENERGY

- Develop energy initiatives locally
- Support energy efficiency (alternative, green, clean)
- Implementation that supports climate initiatives
- Ecological city
- ARTS

- Have over 50% of houses utilize solar, wind technologies instead of geo/coal

X. HEALTH

- Health and wellness, adopt sin tax on soda, cigs, etc. Bike lanes by curb
- A community that lives longer and has a better quality of life
- A holistic approach to community health, all ages.
- Healthy – less opioid prescriptions
- Exercise programs for seniors, advocate for health
- Health/wellness: encouraging healthy behaviors through bike/pedestrian infrastructure, increasing disincentives for unhealthy behaviors. Separated bike lanes
- Healthy community, tobacco free

XI. TOURISM

- Camping space/guest accommodations
- More variety of guest accommodations. More camping, cabins, overnight stays
- More art integrated into city and neighborhoods
- Work with respect for architectural history

Question 3-- What should we be mindful of in our planning process?

I. ARTS, CULTURE, AESTHETICS, HERITAGE

- Promote the vibrant arts: musical, visual arts, dance, theater, Honey for the Heart
- Keep the essence of Athens
- Venues for local music/artists
- Universal design
- Protect the history/heritage/systems that are working (food)
- Use what we have: Essence of Athens
- Our history
- The essence of Athens

II. GREEN SPACE/ENVIRONMENT

- Keeping green spaces
- Trees/green space
- Walkability, green space that draws people in
- Attractive entrances to trails and to Athens in general
- Don't damage the natural environment
- Maintain and value parks and green spaces

- Environmental consciousness: Importance of keeping green space in Athens and protecting areas in Athens county
- Sustainability and mindful of environmental needs
- Controlling the invasives
- Protect biodiversity and wildlife
- Balance regulations and land-use controls
- Mindful of what our city has LOST (neighborhoods, employers, green spaces)

III. NEIGHBORHOODS

- Near-in fringe neighborhoods
- Integrity of functional neighborhoods. A “neighborhood” is not just a cluster of houses

IV. SUPPORT ECONOMY

- Athens city is a hub for so many throughout the county and region: shopping, groceries, recreation, entertainment, employment, healthcare
- Develop Far East side
- Better integrated with the downtown for businesses and customers
- Improving economy
- Making our downtown “shine” to promote economy
- Not everyone can work at OU. Need more living-wage employment options.
- Be mindful of long-term sustainment. What happens when OU is unable to expand?
- When business doesn't come? Ensure services and amenities are able to keep up
- Don't grown too big too fast
- No more pay to play with economic council
- Work towards identifying areas where OU subsidizes internal businesses that stifle local entrepreneurships. Then work towards fixing and creating local business opportunity.
- Find ways to bring business opportunities from OU to local community
- Manage expectations of resources for ideas. \$\$\$ for ideas/development
- Possible to encourage private sector business opportunities.
- Foster and invest as a community in our children child care

V. VISION/NARRATIVE

- Determine what your planning principles and values are. What is guiding us?
- We are not mind readers. We need flexibility to be strategic and responsive built into the community plan

- Resilience
- Sustainability
- Planning as a perpetual process: new challenges require flexibility
- Flexibility for world changes and for opinion changes
- City officials have been anti-everything for 8 years
- How much do we really want growth?
- Keep Athens unique: Don't become another Boulder (?)
- Being conscious of the narrative (like the change of Halloween to be more focused on Athens)
- Sustainability: Community, Equity, Rec.
- Filter everything with love
- Not shying away from complex/controversial topics. Issues can't be siloed
- How do we fit in with national economy? How do we live our ideals
- Who we are: Keep Athens Athens
- Mindful that what we do now will change in X years
- Mindful of not getting stuck with "Athens is great so you don't view alternatives as wrong"
- Plan THEN implement. Who? How?

VI. EQUITY, INCLUSIVE CONVERSATIONS

- Get input from low income citizens
- People with different values
- More printed city-led education about diversity/inclusion within city limits
- Expansion and accessibility
- Inclusive: economically, socially, class, abilities
- Economically and socially inclusive
- Recognize that our most vulnerable will not always be at the planning table: working poor, those with disabilities, limited mobility
- Survey what organizations, groups are doing on their "special interests"
- Be sure to engage ALL demographics, especially the underserved and those utilizing public service programs
- Being mindful of the process
- Economic growth that benefits ALL: County and town
- Inclusiveness
- Be inclusive, particularly those living on the margins. Be in places where people are
- Celebrating and respecting diversity
- Athens: Equity (economic, transport, people)
- Focus on equity
- Be mindful of the limitations of different populations
- Consider the underrepresented communities: minorities

- Social and economic equity: the folks who don't come to these meetings
- Consider folks at all socioeconomic status
- Mindful that everything affects everything else
- Visitability (promoting accessibility)
- Accessibility
- Really listening and valuing what is important to me might not be important to you, and that's ok. Both ideas should be considered.

VII. COLLABORATION

- Breaking down barrier between city and county to make sure folks in the county are included in the planning process
- Strengthen the collaboration with city and university
- Community/OU balance. Symbiotic relationship
- Close gap between town and students
- Inclusive: we're planning for the city but serve the county
- Mindful of the county/city relationship in planning
- Collaborative university/town discussions on growth, public/private investment
- Mindful that Athens is not an island.

VIII. CONNECTIVITY

- Including accommodating service industry employees: meeting schedule flexibility
- Mindful of technology? How we can use it to our advantage
- Connectedness to county and its residents

IX. RESOURCES

- Drain on infrastructure with university expansion
- The next generation, the youth, grads, young professionals
- Repurpose: old could function as today's need (even if you think it should be)
- Transportation: Although we have a robust system, it is still not adequate
- Columbus Road pedestrian improvements and transportation access. \

X. SAFETY AND WELLNESS

- I want to feel safe from crime, drugs, violent assaults, and random violence
- As people get older, need housing, transportation to wellness services and needed medical services
- Safe pest control policy
- Water protection
- How our decisions affect climate