

# Vision and GUIDING Principles

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## A Vision for Albert Lea

***Invent:*** to produce (as something useful) for the first time through the use of the imagination or of ingenious thinking and experiment

***Topography:*** an accurate and detailed description of a place, including land surface configuration, both man-made and natural; the lay of the land

In anticipation of veterans returning home following their service in WWII, we formed a group to help create a job base for returning veterans. We created “Greater Jobs Inc.” as an outcome of our community planning efforts which led to the creation of the first community industrial park in the U.S. When mothers joined the workforce, the need for daycare resulted in Albert Lea forming the nation’s first community non-profit childcare center. After the loss of Farmland Foods in the fire, we united in a process aimed at finding common ground as a community, and began working with a renewed sense of dedication to creating a better place. In the history of Albert Lea we created a lake from a large slough. When faced with a problem, we always find a way to respond creatively, to produce something useful and lasting through imagination, ingenuity, and commitment. We are a community that bands together during challenging times. We partner with one another to bring private and public resources together for the greater good. We are a flourishing Midwestern town nestled into a landscape of lakes and fields, close neighborhoods, and a downtown on a prominent hill. More important, perhaps, we have impressed upon our community an attitude of hope and resilience, and a desire to wrest real solutions from the challenges we face.

We are not only the caretakers of what past generations have built for us. We have to assume for ourselves that same sense of invention that has been passed to us, so that we, too, share in our community’s legacy.

*The Vision and Guiding Principles originate from years of community discussions and dialogue about the future of Albert Lea.*

*Critical to the foundation of our vision are insights gained through past Comprehensive Planning efforts, the Albert Lea Listens Strategic Planning process, The Minnesota Design Team visit and the follow up activities of the Land Between the Lakes Action Team.*

We think about Albert Lea in ways that support a sense of invention. We recognize that this community cannot be defined by a line on a map, and that its corporate limits are only a political boundary. We understand that it is more important that the sense of community be defined, with Albert Lea being “the land between the lakes”—an area that encompasses the town, businesses, homes, schools, and churches... and perhaps most important, the lakes, waterways, and rolling terrain—the topography—that connect them.

We are an important part of the region. Albert Lea is the entertainment, service center and retail center for a larger portion of southern Minnesota. We support our agribusiness even when it reaches beyond our boundaries as it provides a valued economic engine for our region.

But it’s that sense of invention, more than anything else that holds us together as a community. It allows us to think differently about our future, and frame directions that we could not achieve alone. It forces us to investigate, to think in new ways, and to act upon the common ground we share. In applying our sense of invention, we envision...

...an Albert Lea that emphasizes the experiences people have, a place where we are reminded of the beauty of the built and natural environment whether we move about by car, on a bicycle, on foot, or in a boat. When we build, we recognize history, preserving worthy structures for the future, and crafting new ones so that they, too, might someday become worthy of attention. When parts become worn, we seek to replace them with new pieces that restore vibrancy, bring needed activity, and are better for Albert Lea than what they replace.

...a place that is connected... as neighborhoods, districts, corridors, and special features are linked in ways that encourage mobility but are balanced by the experience of the place. But more important, it is a place that is connected to the land, so that our lakes are protected—or even enhanced—for the benefit of future generations, for the benefit of nature. We recognize that our health as a community is inextricably connected to the health of our lakes.

...a good place to do business, where this community maintains its strength as a regional center of economic activity, particularly for those wishing to invest in new small and medium-sized businesses. While the proximity of the interstates is an opportunity, we will not define ourselves by freeways—we know our place is more than its interstates, so we invite people to explore. We seek quality economic prospects based on Albert Lea’s intrinsic resources and character, based on their “fit” to our community, and by their potential for lending new energy to the broader community.



*A frosty picturesque moment in Albert Lea.*



*Twin Lakes 4H Club contribution to the County Courthouse.*

...a community that tells its stories through arts, community activities, and the design of its buildings and public spaces, with places that bring people together in a time when modern life tends more to pull us apart. We seek partnerships to shape cultural and recreational activities, in venues that include parks, streets, and wild and preserved places, inviting participation from residents and visitors, former residents and new ones, people of all ages and backgrounds. We see Albert Lea as a place that is particular in its orientation to families, and we see it as a setting that creates good neighbors.

## **Guiding Principles**

As much as our vision suggests a way of thinking about possible directions and solutions, a set of principles helps to guide us toward a plan that fundamentally “fits” Albert Lea. We might use these principles as a primary filter for suitability—not just for this work, but for the actions taken by others as new projects are considered by the community. These principles were first articulated during the Minnesota Design Team (MDT) event, and then were adopted by a wide range of interests in the Albert Lea community. These principles are not rules—rules can be changed to better fit the vision as the community learns how to best implement its vision, but changing a principle only diminishes the community’s good intentions. Together with the vision statement, they become critical tools for measuring the fit of proposals for change—even before we employ more common regulatory rules like our zoning ordinance.

Although the guiding principles formulated during the MDT event are still largely appropriate to Albert Lea, the context for some have changed. The first principle has become a part principle, part motto, and part directive for physical planning. In many ways, this first principle deals with the foundation character of our community, and frames the ways that many of the physical planning decisions for Albert Lea will be made.

### *Albert Lea is the land between the lakes.*

...The bounds of our community are not the same as those found on a map. Instead, our community of Albert Lea reaches out to include 11 lakes in the watershed—essentially the entire area between (and surrounding) those lakes. Significantly, projects beyond the lakes seem to have less connection to our community, a hint, perhaps, about the significance of the “land between the lakes.”

Other principles are useful in recognizing the ways in which our community sees itself, and set out directives that further guide our actions in physical planning as well as social, environmental, cultural, and economic initiatives.



*Brainstorming and discussing ideas and directions.*



*Marion Ross (aka Mrs. Cunningham) from the sitcom Happy Days celebrates Albert Lea as her home.*

***“Guiding principles are not rules—rules can be changed to better fit the vision...”***

***Together with the vision statement, they become critical tools for measuring the fit of proposals for change...”***

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## Albert Lea's Guiding Principles

- ▶ *Albert Lea is the Land Between the Lakes*
- ▶ *Embrace diversity*
- ▶ *Healthy lakes equal a healthy Albert Lea*
- ▶ *Encourage evolution not revolution*
- ▶ *Experience Albert Lea by walking, biking or paddling*
- ▶ *Encourage new while planning the old*
- ▶ *Restore and re-use your treasures*
- ▶ *Keep edges close*
- ▶ *Enrich public life*
- ▶ *Ask your neighbor*
- ▶ *Make parks the common ground of the community*
- ▶ *Create neighborhoods not housing*
- ▶ *Create new tools to solve old problems*



*Paddling on Albert Lea Lake*

### *Embrace diversity.*

...Diversity, in popular terms, often refers to the engagement of other cultures. But in Albert Lea, our actions should focus on their ability to address a broader range of diversity points (including economic, biological, and generational diversity). Ultimately, the ways in which we truly embrace diversity will frame our abilities to sustain ourselves and our community.

### *Healthy lakes equal a healthy Albert Lea.*

...The quality of the water in the lakes of Albert Lea, arguably our most significant natural asset, in many ways determines the ability of the community to attract residents, draw tourists, and maintain a clean environment. But more important is the psychological effect the lakes might have on the people of Albert Lea: we cherish the lakes, and if they are degraded, so too are our spirits.

### *Encourage evolution, not revolution.*

...Change does not need to happen overnight. It has taken decades for the Albert Lea we see today to become what it is. We have learned over the years that we must be patient and should seek incremental change—taking a few measured but positive steps toward a shared vision of the future.

### *Experience Albert Lea by means other than the car such as walking, biking, or paddling.*

...The richness of the Albert Lea community, its buildings and its lakes, cannot be fairly comprehended inside of a car traveling at 30 miles per hour. Rather, a more direct engagement of these resources achieved under human power reveals their great character. There is a social aspect, as well: we cannot engage one another in a car the way we can on foot.

### *Encourage new while planning the old.*

...Efforts to plan often consider how the new features will become important to the function of the community. For every project that replaces an existing use, we must develop a strategy for what is left when the new project is complete. As we extend our community outward toward new opportunities, we cannot forget to once again touch those opportunities that lie closer to the center of Albert Lea, reclaiming pieces of our community that have served us well and that will, with attention, again become vital and valued parts of Albert Lea.

Restore and re-use your treasures.

...Once razed, a building is lost to the community forever. Real care should be exercised when dealing with parts of our community that are architecturally significant—or those parts that might, someday, become so. The same would apply to idle land or land used for agriculture—both of which, when developed will not change again for generations. A wise course of action might be to restore buildings, re-using them for new activities while their structures retain their intrinsic qualities, and to fully consider the impacts of new development at the edges, recognizing that land, too, is a treasure.

Keep edges close.

...As you look south on Broadway in downtown, there is a sense that the countryside is just beyond the last hill. As you enter the community from just about any direction, farm fields lie just beyond new homes and businesses. The sense that fields are close is an important character point for our community. A similar sense of compactness is important in downtown, keeping neighborhoods close by and allowing for a greater pedestrian environment.

Enrich public life.

...Every project has the opportunity to have an impact on the public realm of Albert Lea. The real opportunity is how those projects and the public and private spaces they create might serve as a stage for human engagement. Our community strives to create a place for the visible activities of people, especially families, in its public actions as well as those more private ventures that we, as a community, choose to support.

Ask your neighbor.

...The projects that Albert Lea contemplates cannot be achieved without great public support. And everyone has to be a part of the process. The methods of engagement are really quite simple: the people who must become active in these processes are your neighbors. While in most cases our elected leadership assumes responsibility for change, the reality is that we all are responsible for affecting change.

Make parks the common ground of the community.

...Our parks, like our lakes, are one of the signatures of our community. Each is unique, and serves a need in the community. While some might serve a special purpose in Albert Lea, their identity is found in the neighborhood they are connected to.



*Albert Lea's new High School offers a modern learning environment for our community. The former site near downtown now provides new opportunities to grow a major employer and service provider, Albert Lea Medical Center.*



*"A wise course of action might be to restore buildings, re-using them for new activities while their structures retain their intrinsic qualities..."*



*"The sense that fields are close is an important character point for our community."*



*“The methods of engagement are really quite simple: the people who must become active in these processes are your neighbors.”*



*Our parks are great assets that are the common ground for our communities and the foundation of our neighborhoods.*

*Create neighborhoods, not housing.*

...What’s great about our neighborhoods is that they really feel like a great place to live. We want to create great neighborhoods in our community—places where people interact with their neighbors but also interact with the community, where parks are a focal point of activity, where streets are an integral part of the neighborhood’s landscape and character and where things get better with age.

*Create new tools to solve old problems.*

...It’s not likely that sound or whole solutions can be found using the old tools. Instead, we need to apply that sense of invention that has time and again brought forward new ideas and new methods, so that we solve the problems we face using the most current thoughts and the best contemporary practices.

There is value in what exists in Albert Lea and we are the ones that must take the lead. Albert Lea belongs to those who choose to be a part of the community, and no one knows it better than those who are already a part of the community. The assets of Albert Lea suggest that it will be an attractive place for new residents and businesses. As proposals for change are brought forward, we must support and advance those projects and improvements that create positive change in our community.

This plan shapes that change and the principles are our basic guide.