

Searcy, Arkansas Comprehensive Plan



INTRODUCTION

This document presents the adopted Comprehensive Plan for the City of Searcy, Arkansas. It replaces other adopted plans unless noted otherwise. Both the Searcy Planning Commission and The Searcy City Council have adopted the plan in accordance with applicable state laws.

Purpose

The Comprehensive Plan sets out the official policy of the City regarding growth and development. It outlines the goals, strategies, and plans for development within the Searcy Planning Area.

The plan does not direct land use arrangement precisely nor is it a zoning ordinance. Rather, the plan serves as an instrument to blend public and private interests in a manner that will best serve the entire community. The plan does not obligate the City Council to expend funds but it does recommend projects that will carry out long-range goals.

The Planning Commission directed the preparation of the plan after careful study of the area. Areas of analysis included Searcy's history, topography, trends, utility capacity, transportation systems, financial condition, existing infrastructure, and surrounding land use. The planning process included public meetings, and the comments and ideas generated by the public are represented in this plan.

Authority

The purpose of the Land Use Plan is consistent with the provisions of Arkansas, Codes, Annotated (ACA) §14-56-403. This section requires that plans of a municipality be "...prepared in order to promote, in accordance with present and future needs, the safety, morals, order, convenience, and general welfare of the citizens." The statutes further state that plans may provide for, among other things, the following:

- Efficiency and economy in the process of development
- The appropriate and best use of land
- Convenience of traffic and circulation of people and goods
- Safety from fire and other dangers
- Adequate light and air in the use and occupancy of buildings
- Healthful and convenient distribution of population
- Good civic design and arrangement
- Adequate public utilities and facilities
- Wise and efficient expenditure of funds

The Planning Area

The Searcy Planning Area Boundary appears in graphic form on the plan map and other maps used with this document. The Planning Area Map was prepared in accordance with statutes found in the Arkansas Codes, Annotated § 14-56-413. A copy is on file with the City Clerk and the White County Recorder.

CONTEXT

Cities do not function in either a physical or social vacuum. Any number of factors control the way a community can best meet the future. The following sections examine the most significant of these factors.

History

The city of Searcy, Arkansas began as a small resort community called White Sulphur Springs, named for the natural springs nearby that have since run dry. The community was not officially named Searcy until November 23, 1837, many years after the first settlers moved there.

The city was named after a prominent figure in the state, Richard Searcy, who was appointed to the Superior Court of the Arkansas Territory by President James Monroe. Israel Moore was one of the first property owners in the city. He donated the area that is now Spring Park to the city for the free use of its citizens. He also surveyed the town and laid out its streets, naming them after those in old downtown Philadelphia where he once lived.

Two other towns were surveyed before Searcy, but neither developed. When White County was formed on October 23, 1835, eight months before Arkansas achieved statehood, there were no official cities or post offices in the area. After Searcy became the county seat it began to grow, but it was not until August 6, 1851 that Searcy was officially incorporated.

The original county seat of White County was Frankfort, but citizens petitioned for its relocation to Searcy and got their wish in 1840. The first county courthouse was built in Searcy in 1839, and at that time, there were fewer than 1,000 residents in the entire county. The current White County courthouse, constructed in 1871, sits in the same location as the original structure and is the oldest functioning courthouse in the state.

Schools and institutions of higher education were founded early on in Searcy. In 1849, a polytechnic school was formed in the city, and three years later, the Searcy Male Academy was established. A college for females, named Galloway College, opened in 1889, and was said to be the largest school for females in the South at one time. In 1930, Galloway College merged with Hendrix and Henderson-Brown College and closed soon after. Eventually, Harding University moved from its original location in Morrilton to the Galloway College site in Searcy.

As with most towns in Arkansas, Searcy struggled during the Civil War era, but many strong and determined citizens help the city succeed. One such citizen was General Dandridge McRae, a veteran of the Civil War who was eventually appointed Arkansas Deputy Secretary of State in 1881. Today there is an elementary school, athletic field, and street in Searcy and a nearby town named in his honor.

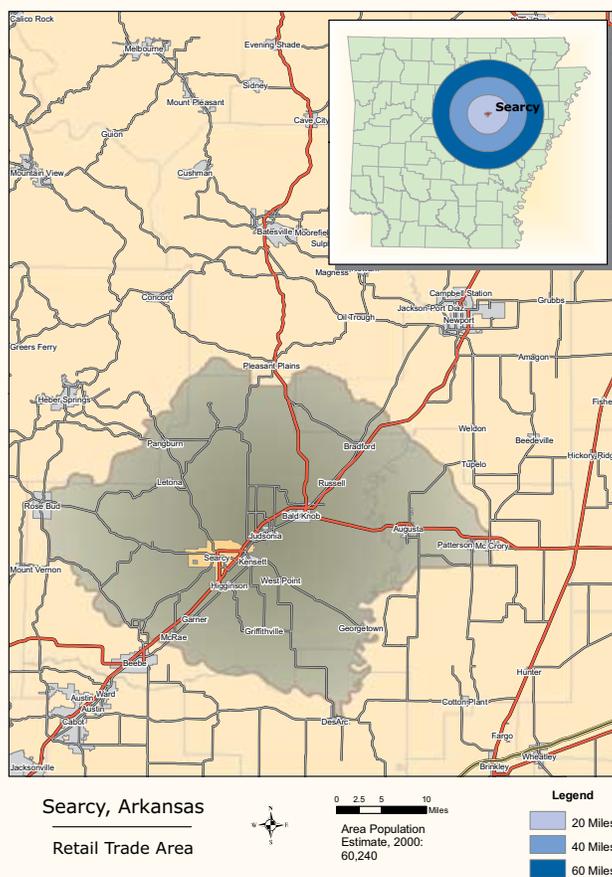
Before the Civil War, the major industry in White County was agriculture. By the turn of the century, this industry and others were booming in Searcy due greatly in part to the St. Louis Iron Mountain and Southern Railroad. In 1873, this railroad was completed to Little Rock, but it did not run through Searcy. The citizens of Searcy were so determined to reap the benefits of the railroad that they built the Searcy Branch Railroad to connect to the main line. At this time, there were three cities in Arkansas with the name Searcy, and the one in White County was the smallest. However, with the introduction of the railroad and other great advances, Searcy became the sole survivor.

In the 1880s, Searcy experienced a major housing boom. By the turn of the century, it had a population of about 2,000 citizens and a bank, cotton gin, planing mill, telegraph, fruit and vegetable canning factory, two steam grist mills, three newspapers, and

daily mail deliveries. The population of White County doubled in 20 years, from about 8,316 people in 1860 to 17,794 in 1880. By 1909, Arkansas was ranked fifth in the nation in lumber production, much of which came from White County. In 1929, the county was ranked fourth in the state for cotton production, and by 1920 Searcy was a leading producer of strawberries in the state. In 1932, Yarnell's Ice Cream Co., Arkansas' only independent ice cream company, was founded in Searcy.

Regional Setting

- Searcy, the county seat of White County, is located along the Little Red River at the foothills of the Ozark Mountains near the Arkansas Delta region. The planning area forms a portion of the northeast/central section of the state, 50 miles northeast of Little Rock and 80 miles southwest of Jonesboro. Other area cities include Cabot, Heber Springs, Batesville, Beebe, and Newport. The map on this page indicates the approximate trade area of the city. This map indicates the positive position Searcy maintains in terms of sales tax revenue.



Searcy is served by US 67/167 highway running southwest to northeast through the planning area. This corridor connects the city to Interstate Highway 30 at Little Rock via four-lane controlled access roadways. The corridor is primary traffic way through northeast Arkansas and has been considered for inclusion into the Eisenhower Interstate Highway system.

Not only is Searcy connected by its roadways, the city airport links the city to the rest of the state and country. The Searcy Municipal Airport is in the southern portion of the city. The airport provides 6,008 feet of runway and features an instrument landing system. It is capable of accommodating jet service which may see increased demand with the advent of the natural gas industry in the region.

The Little Red River is located to the northeast of Searcy. The Little Red is a cold flowing stream that supports a world class trout fishery. While locally the river is not capable of supporting a viable trout habitat, it does provide an excellent recreational and scenic amenity.

Other factors contribute to the quality of life in Searcy. Harding University provides a classic college town atmosphere. In addition, the university has provided educational opportunities to Searcy residents since its formation, and its economic impact on the region is significant. Adding to this educational economic bonus is the presence of the Arkansas State University Campus in the north part of the city. The Walmart Distribution Center, Yarnell's Ice Cream, First Security Bancorp, and natural gas industries provide the city with even more jobs and revenue.

TRENDS

Over the past 16 years, Searcy has experienced steady growth at a rate higher than both the county and the state. The city has enjoyed a growth rate of between 1.5 and 2.5 percent per year. This represents a steady, healthy rate which does not overload municipal systems with explosive demand. With the advent of the natural gas industry in north-central Arkansas, the city continues to grow and the future growth rate may exceed that of the past.

According to the 2000 census, the city had a relatively high percentage of residents with college degrees. The location of two institutions of higher learning helps account for this fact.

The housing stock in Searcy has diversified in recent years with a greater percentage of multi-family and rental units. However, as with most mature cities in the state, much of the housing stock in Searcy is old. Almost 70 percent of units are over 30 years old and 14.7 percent were built before 1940. As a result of a strong code enforcement program, very few have deteriorated to the point that they cannot be maintained in a livable condition.

Overall, Searcy is a growing and diversifying city with many unique resources. Its impressively high percentage of college graduates is coupled with a comparatively low percentage of high school dropouts. The city will need to work to increase affordable housing in the future considering the need to maintain the community as an attractive place for new homeowners as well as older citizens. Workforce housing will also be a priority for future planning efforts.

In summary, existing trends are positive for the city despite the fact that this plan originated during a downturn in the national economy. White County's unemployment rate during the first four months of April 2009 mirrored that of the state of Arkansas. Both entities saw a slight decline in the unemployment rate while the national rate was rising. Sales tax revenues also continued to rise during this period.

ISSUES

Although Searcy enjoys a stable and prosperous development pattern, it must address the same issues facing other cities of its size. It is important that land—although held in separate ownerships—develops in such a manner as to protect property values and protect the health, safety, and welfare of its citizens. It is also important that the transportation system allow efficient delivery of goods and services. Finally, the development of community facilities must keep up with the growth of the community. Coordination of these efforts represents a major function of this plan. The following sections treat these issues in more detail.

Land Use

As the City of Searcy moves into the 21st Century, land use needs change from those that may have existed in the past. The city developed into its present state through its reliance upon traditional economic development engines and the fact that Searcy is a “university city.” While these factors are still important, they now compete for attention from



Spring Park in the heart of the city.

other emerging forces such as the growth of the natural gas industry, encroachment of rural water districts, protection of environmentally sensitive areas, and the need for greater diversification of the housing market. A city must periodically reevaluate its development pressures and attempt to prepare for change whether the change is considered positive or negative.

Objectives

- To be responsive to need development needs of Searcy's growing economy
- To promote a healthy mix of commercial, residential, and industrial development
- To provide “workforce” and “young graduate” housing.
- To promote a healthy downtown that serves as central focus of the community
- To preserve the natural functions of environmentally sensitive areas
- To preserve areas important to the local cultural heritage
- To direct development toward areas where existing infrastructures can support it
- To create neighborhoods of choice
- To ensure a high quality of urban design along the city's signature gateways
- To promote infill development and regeneration of blighted areas.

Transportation

Searcy is a city of corridors. These corridors connect the city's western and northern residential areas as well as downtown to U.S. 67/167—the region's primary traffic way. The corridors over time have served to provide areas valuable to commercial development as reliance on the automobile has increased. While providing great economic returns this development has served to diminished the functional capacity of these corridors, which has necessitated construction of a bypass around the north and western portions of the city. Furthermore, the dominance of the automobile creates an environment that makes pedestrian and bicycle transportation a challenge. Addressing issues concerning both automobile and alternative transportation forms is a priority of this plan.

Objectives

- To preserve the traffic-carrying capacity of the city's primary corridors
- To prevent over-development and poorly designed development along primary corridors with significant vacant land such as Beebe-Capps Expressway
- To provide for the use of alternative forms of transportation
- To provide viable east-west and north-south traffic routes for the movement of people, goods, and services.
- To coordinate transportation and land use decisions and forecasting
- To provide for new arterials where necessary
- To promote extension of the roadway system utilizing a grid pattern as well as alignment with existing roadways

Community Facilities

A growing community such as Searcy is faced with many unique challenges. One of these is the provision of adequate community facilities. For Searcy these challenges will rest primarily in the realm of fire and police protection along with parks and recreational opportunities. The main fire and police stations should prove sufficient during the planning period. New facilities will be planned in such a manner as to maintain a level of serviced consistent with national standards.

Objectives

- To maintain the city's current ISO fire protection rating
- To provide adequate police protection for the community
- To ensure recreational opportunities are well distributed throughout the community
- To meet nationally recognized standards for the provision of park facilities
- To consider the provision of community facilities in any future development approvals
- To maximize the potential of all existing city parks
- To position Searcy as a major regional recreation center in north-central Arkansas
- To provide pedestrian and bicycle linkages to major community attractions
- To provide community facilities that will enhance or magnify the benefits of the community's assets such as Harding



Downtown Commercial

University

Housing

Searcy enjoyed a boom in new housing development during the last two decades. At the same time, a large percentage of the houses in the city are more than 70 years old. Thus housing efforts should include the gradual replacement of housing that deteriorates to the point at which repair becomes too costly to justify.

GOALS

The following goals guide the creation of an action program for the preservation and improvement of community life within the Searcy Planning Area. The goals are long-range in nature and cannot be accomplished overnight. Their intent is to serve as both a guide and a method of measuring progress over time. Goals may change or be expanded over time, and as they are, they will be incorporated into the plan.

At the time of the adoption of the plan, the community development goals were as follows.

- Maintain an up-to-date community plan, along with supporting regulations that will promote the orderly growth and development of the Searcy Planning Area.
- Maintain plans and regulations in a format suitable for use by staff, public officials, and the general public.
- Preserve the historic nature of the city and its physical surroundings.
- Retain a Class II ISO Fire rating for the city.
- Support the development of unused property in the developed portions of the planning area and the redevelopment of property that creates a blighting influence on the community. Regulate development in such a manner as to protect the health, safety, and welfare of all residents within the planning area.
- Support development that will maintain safe streets and neighborhoods within the city.
- Partner with the private sector to create developments and neighborhoods within the city.
- Plan in advance for transportation and community facility improvements that will meet adopted standards for a growing population.
- Facilitate developments that will result in the growth of job and business opportunities.
- Support the efforts of quasi-public entities such as the Chamber of Commerce, SREDC, and Main Street Searcy.
- Expand transportation plans to accommodate pedestrian, bicycles, and public transit.
- Protect and improve the physical appearance of the city and its environs.
- Protect the downtown area as the physical core of the city and support developments that act as magnets for human activity in the area.
- Improve the physical relationships between the city and its major institutions.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Included below are actionable steps that will be used to carry out the proposals in the comprehensive plan. The primary step towards implementing the Searcy Comprehensive Plan will be adoption by the City Council. Adoption will communicate to all stakeholders the city's commitment to Searcy's future and its policies for future development. The steps below will be used to implement and fulfill the goals of the comprehensive development plan. The city should take these steps and form a time line, budget, and overall plan of action for implementing the steps below.

In prioritizing the components of this work program, the city should adopt the following strategies:

- Address the city's basic needs first.
- Build upon the community's assets.
- Balance considerations of growth and community enhancement
- Employ a comprehensive, lateral viewpoint.
- Seek out opportunities for public-private partnerships.

The action items are broken up into the following three categories: land use, transportation, community facilities

Land Use

- Review and revise existing zoning and subdivision codes into a unified development code.
- Promote higher development densities along planned infrastructure.
- Create overlay zoning districts along primary corridors.
- Ensure local rural water districts comply with state policies regarding the construction of water lines within the city's planning area.
- Work to eliminate barriers that might prevent the provision of "workforce" and "young graduate" housing.



Downtown Mixed-Use

- Continue to work with Main Street Searcy, SREDC, and the Chamber of Commerce in promoting Searcy's downtown and economic development.

- Adopt formal policies regarding development in environmentally sensitive areas such as floodplains and areas of steep topography.

- Encourage innovative development.

Transportation

- Implement access management controls along arterial roadways including Beebe-Capps Expressway.

- Maintain an acceptable level of service along the city's primary corridors.

- Construct a bypass around the northern and western portions of

Searcy from Judsonia to Highway 13.

- Improve traffic flow on Benton, Elm, Gum Springs, Pioneer, Queensway, Poplar to ease traffic demands along Main St.
- Improve pedestrian and bicycle safety and access .
- Designate a pedestrian route from Harding University to Spring Park and from Spring Park north along Spring Street to the Courthouse Square and beyond.
- Provide pedestrian crossings from Park street across Main Street to Spring Park and from across Pleasure from the Library complex.

Community Facilities

- Maintain and improve fire response times.
- Relocate Fire Station Two on the north side of East Moore Avenue between River Oaks Village and the Wilbur Mills Center.
- Construct a fire station near West Country Club.
- Construct a fire station near the intersection of the proposed bypass and Gum Springs Road.
- Construct a fire station near the Searcy Municipal Airport.
- Build adequate park facilities to serve the western portion of the city.
- Require subdivision development approvals to include considerations for park facilities.



Photo-enhancement of Mulberry Street Landscaping

- Acquire access for Riverside Park from Bypass Road.
- Fully develop all existing park facilities including the Searcy Sports Complex and Riverside Park to promote regional recreational opportunities.
- Study options for a new water-park facility or community center.
- Expand the trail system to the southern and western portions of the city.
- Explore opportunities with private organizations to provide hiking, mountain biking, and nature trails in the planning area.
- Assist in the development of a new library complex in the downtown area.

Regulatory

Accomplishing the programs outlined in the preceding sections will require a number of refinements to the city's existing land use regulations. Also, there have been multiple revisions to the existing codes since their original adoption. To carry out the provisions of this plan, land use regulations will be combined into a single "unified" code.

In addition to the zoning and subdivision codes, the unified code will contain additional regulations governing such areas as drainage, stormwater management, and street construction standards. Other regulations that will be considered for the unified code include:

- Overlay district regulations for key corridors within the city.
- Optional form-based zoning regulations for large-scale or

innovative developments.

- Enterprise overlay districts for area designated as emerging business areas. These would be districts where normal regulations might be reduced in order to promote new business development.
- New regulations that will allow mixed-use developments.
- Enhanced residential life in and around the downtown area

SUMMARY

No plan can foresee the future. Rather, plans simply envision potential impacts and set forth the means to accommodate those impacts. They must do so within the fiscal restraints imposed on the City Council and in a manner that will best protect the public health, safety, and welfare.

It is also important that the city move forward while retaining its positive aspects. For example, in 2009, the Searcy Fire Department received National Accreditation, one of only 28 fire departments in the world to do so. Positive accomplishments by this and the other fine departments of the city must be supported and maintained.

As new challenges face the city, the elements treated herein will be affected. When this occurs, the Planning Commission will amend this plan and forward the amended plan to the City Council for certification. The need for a community facility or new transportation link in the future shall not validate the plan nor the planning process. In this manner, the plan will become a living document that can evolve to meet changing circumstances.

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