



growing | home

NWA REGIONAL STRATEGY

nwa

A Regional Growth Strategy to Guide Northwest Arkansas as it Prepares for 1 Million Residents.

Regional Vision | April 2026



Acknowledgments

This strategy reflects the collective effort of cities, counties, institutions, businesses, and partners across Northwest Arkansas. It was developed to support informed decision-making as the region grows, grounded in local knowledge, technical analysis, and long-term stewardship of shared resources.

This document was prepared with support from the **Walton Family Foundation** as part of an ongoing commitment to the long-term vitality, affordability, and resilience of Northwest Arkansas.

Contributors

Northwest Arkansas Council

Groundwork

Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission

DPZ CoDesign

PlaceMakers

Crafton Tull

Urban3

Zimmerman/Volk Associates

Carrico Illustrations

Concurrent & Ongoing Efforts

Northwest Arkansas has not been idle. Cities and regional agencies are addressing many of the concerns, strategies, and goals reflected in this and related documents. While this report was produced in 2025-26, the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission advanced Forward 2050, the region's long-range transportation plan, alongside studies for bus rapid transit, greenway improvements, and numerous additional efforts. Fayetteville established a stormwater utility. The Northwest Arkansas Council partnered with the state on a regional wastewater study, and communities in western Benton County have explored forming a combined wastewater utility.

Many cities have taken additional steps aligned with the solutions outlined here, such as zoning code changes and downtown master plans. Together, these efforts—both recent and ongoing—demonstrate the region's commitment and its capacity to act. This document builds on that foundation by examining challenges holistically, across jurisdictions and systems, and by elevating the need for stronger coordination, shared goals, clear accountability, and a common regional vision.

April 15, 2026

Growing Home NWA: Shaping the Future of Northwest Arkansas

Northwest Arkansas has become one of the most dynamic regions in the country because leaders across business, government, education and the nonprofit sector aligned around a shared vision for the region. While that success created significant opportunities, it also brought pressures that must be addressed as the region grows toward 1 million residents by 2050. The Growing Home NWA regional strategy is designed to help shape that growth so Northwest Arkansas remains affordable, connected and true to the qualities that make people want to live here.

Growth is already changing daily life across our communities. Housing costs are rising. Commutes are longer. Infrastructure systems are strained. Residents want to preserve the sense of place that defines Northwest Arkansas while ensuring the region remains competitive and accessible for future generations.

The Growing Home NWA strategy was developed to help guide the decisions ahead. Over the coming decades, the region will make hundreds of choices about transportation, housing, infrastructure, land use and community development. Many of those decisions will shape not only individual communities but the region as a whole. **This strategy offers a shared framework to help leaders understand the long-term consequences of those decisions and the opportunities created by working together.**

This effort builds on work already underway across Northwest Arkansas, including local plans, infrastructure investments and long-range transportation planning. It is intended to support those efforts by providing a regional perspective at a time when many of the systems that support daily life already operate across city and county lines. Housing markets cross boundaries. Labor pools are regional. Water and utility networks serve multiple communities. Coordinating where it makes sense can improve outcomes and reduce long-term costs.

The strategy reflects more than 16 months of research, analysis and engagement with residents, elected officials, business leaders, developers, farmers, educators and community organizations across Northwest Arkansas. Their input helped shape priorities that aim to preserve quality of life while supporting continued growth.

I am grateful to the many partners who contributed to this work, including the Walton Family Foundation, the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission and the hundreds of residents and stakeholders who shared their perspectives and expertise.

Growth will continue. The choice before us is whether it strengthens the region we love or makes it harder to sustain. **Northwest Arkansas has the leadership, collaboration and resolve to grow in a way that benefits all of us.**

Sincerely,

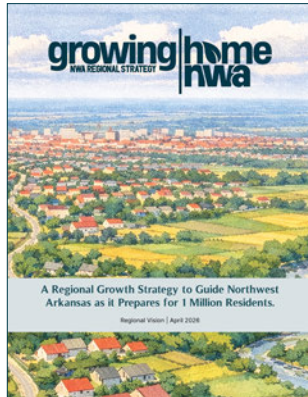
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Peacock', written in a cursive style.

Nelson Peacock

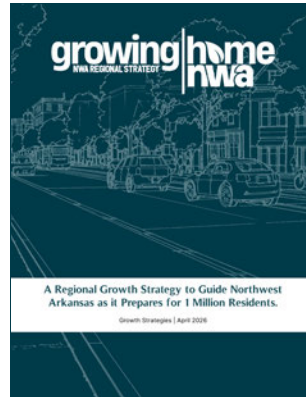
President and CEO, Northwest Arkansas Council

Accompanying Documents

This document, **Regional Vision**, is one in a pair of reports that comprise the Regional Growth Strategy for Northwest Arkansas. These and supporting analytical documents are available from the Northwest Arkansas Council.

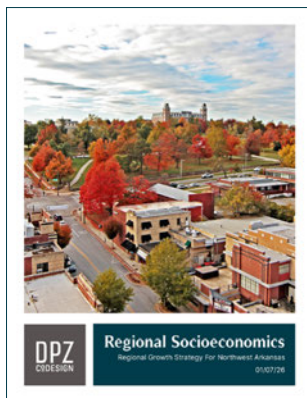


Regional Vision
This Report

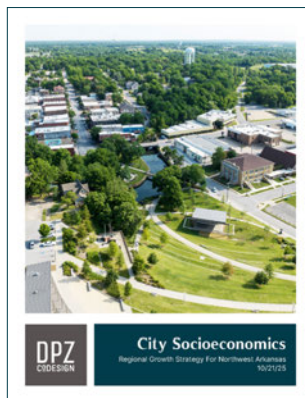


Growth Strategies
Companion Report

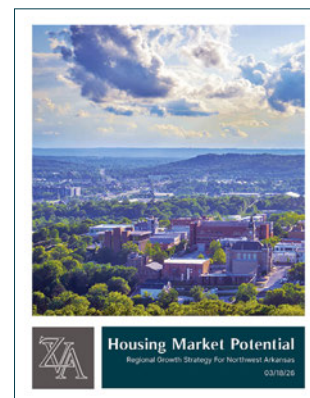
Supporting Documents: Analysis of Current Conditions in Northwest Arkansas, 2025



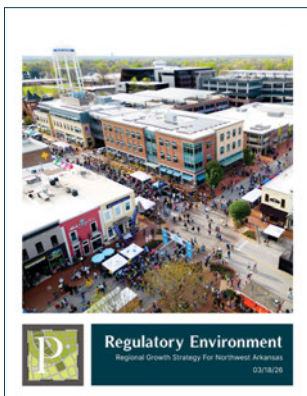
Regional Socioeconomics
Prepared by: DPZ CoDesign



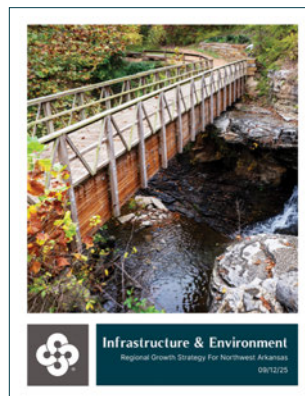
City Socioeconomics
Prepared by: DPZ CoDesign



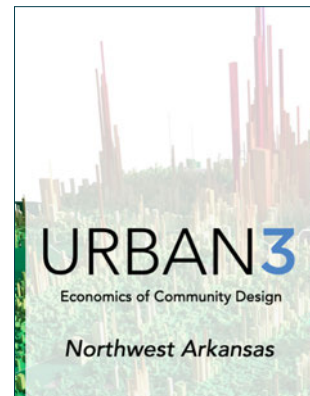
Housing Market Potential
Prepared by: Zimmerman/Volk Assoc.



Regulatory Environment
Prepared by: PlaceMakers



Infrastructure & Environment
Prepared by: Crafton Tull



Economics of Community Design
Prepared by: Urban3

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Northwest Arkansas is approaching a pivotal moment.

As the region presses on toward **1 million** residents by **2050**, growth will either strengthen long-term prosperity or intensify the strain systems are increasingly experiencing. Housing costs, congestion, and infrastructure demands are rising alongside the much-discussed rise in population. Without a more coordinated approach, Northwest Arkansas risks becoming less affordable, less accessible and more difficult to manage over time.

Many of these pressures are structural, not temporary. Development patterns, infrastructure obligations, and rising service demands are increasing costs for households, employers, and local governments alike. Without changes, the long-term cost of maintaining infrastructure and services will continue to rise, placing more strain on communities.

The Growing Home NWA Regional Growth Strategy was developed in response to these pressures and the need for a coordinated approach to growth. It provides regional leaders and local governments with a shared framework for aligning decisions about housing, transportation, infrastructure, and development so growth strengthens quality of life, economic opportunity and long-term competitiveness.

The strategy finds that the region's **most pressing challenges are interconnected**. Housing availability affects commuting patterns. Development patterns influence infrastructure costs. Transportation access shapes workforce participation. Decisions made by one community increasingly affect outcomes across Northwest Arkansas.

Northwest Arkansas already functions as one economic and infrastructure system in many ways. Long-term success will depend on decisions that reflect that reality.

Today, many of the systems that support daily life already operate at a regional scale, while planning and investment decisions are often made locally. As a result, growth can shift costs from one community to another rather than reducing them overall.

If current patterns continue:

- Households are likely to face higher combined housing and transportation costs.
- Cities and utilities will face growing obligations to maintain and expand infrastructure.
- Pressure on natural resources, rural areas and open space will intensify.

A coordinated response is required.

The strategy outlines a coordinated approach focused on six priorities that must be addressed together:

1. Encourage development that strengthens community and preserves rural land.
2. Guide growth to areas where infrastructure can be sustained long term.
3. Expand housing options to support residents at every stage of life.
4. Improve transportation connections to reduce congestion and shorten trips.
5. Coordinate water planning across jurisdictions.
6. Strengthen regional collaboration to match the scale of growth.

2050

What this report contains:

The report is organized into two parts.

VISION

The Regional Vision describes a preferred future for Northwest Arkansas as the region grows.

STRATEGIES

A companion Regional Strategies document outlines priority actions, policy tools and partnership opportunities across transportation, housing, infrastructure, and development.

Together, they provide a practical guide for leaders making decisions that will influence the region for decades to come.

Implementation

Implementing this strategy will require sustained collaboration among cities, counties, utilities, employers, and community organizations. Some actions can begin immediately through existing planning and infrastructure decisions. Others will require long-term coordination and investment.

The Vision

The images in this report show Northwest Arkansas' small cities as places that are far different than they are today. The buildings are taller and closer together, overlooked places are active and economically productive. The illustrations paint a view of what Northwest Arkansas can be with the right attention to every decision, every investment, and every detail. These depictions are visionary and illustrate what Northwest Arkansas can be 30 to 50 years from now.

Northwest Arkansas has navigated major growth challenges in the past through long-term thinking and cooperation across communities. The decisions made in the coming years will determine whether the region continues to grow in ways that strengthen quality of life and economic opportunity or whether rising costs and infrastructure strain begin to erode those advantages.

This strategy is intended to help leaders make those decisions with a clear understanding of the stakes and the opportunities ahead, so growth strengthens the region rather than diminishes what makes it special.

Analysis

The report includes analysis of growth trends, housing and transportation patterns and infrastructure capacity across Northwest Arkansas, along with examples of how different development choices could shape the region's future. It identifies measurable outcomes to track progress over time and highlights opportunities for coordination among communities, utilities, employers, and regional partners. Supporting documents detail the economic, demographic, regulatory, built and environmental conditions at the time this report was prepared.

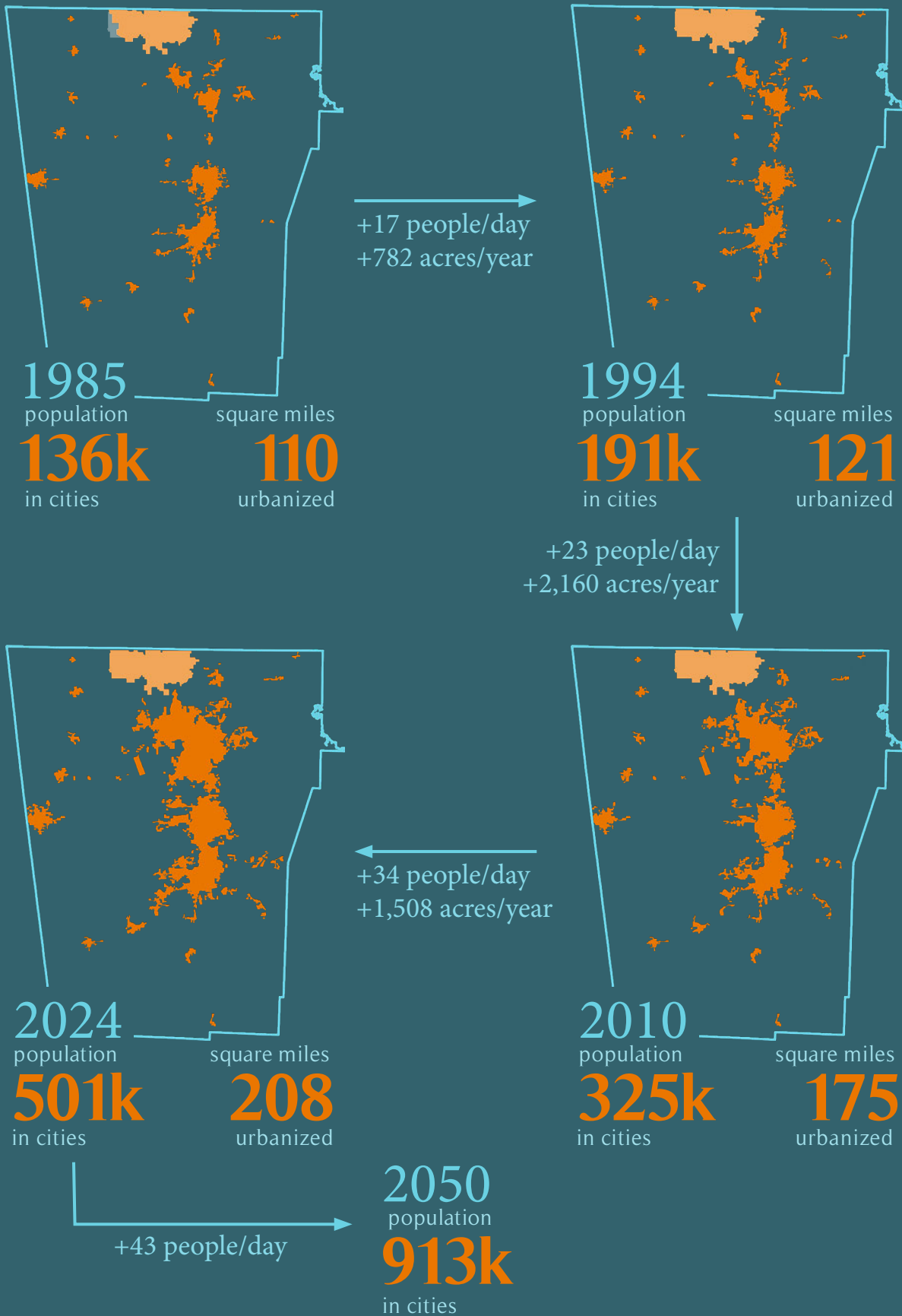
Public Input

Engagement for the Regional Growth Strategy was broad and multi-layered, combining leadership input, interviews, and public outreach. The process began in early 2025 with meetings involving mayors, business leaders, and the development community, followed by 28 one-on-one interviews that provided deeper insight into housing, infrastructure, workforce, and growth challenges.

Public engagement expanded during a regional Roadshow held September 17–24, 2025, which included 18 in-person events across multiple cities and reached over 1,000 participants. Attendance ranged from large gatherings, such as 486 people at the Fayetteville Farmers Market and over 120 at a two-county Quorum Court meeting, to smaller, focused sessions with key stakeholder groups.

Digital outreach complemented in-person efforts. An online survey collected 1,562 responses, and a regional webinar added 134 participants. Website traffic exceeded 1,600 visitors, supported by targeted outreach and media coverage that broadened awareness.

Across all formats, participants emphasized natural beauty, community character, and quality of life as defining strengths, while raising concerns about housing costs, traffic, infrastructure capacity, and long-term public costs. Together, this engagement provides a strong foundation for the Regional Growth Strategy and a clear call for more coordinated action across Northwest Arkansas.



Northwest Arkansas is on pace to approach **1 million** residents within a generation. Each decade has brought faster daily population growth than the one before it, and more land urbanized. The question is not whether growth will continue, but how it will be shaped and where it will land.

Growth is Raising the Stakes

Each year, growth becomes less efficient, increasing stress on households, infrastructure, and city budgets.

Northwest Arkansas is growing quickly, and residents are feeling the effects in everyday life. Housing costs are rising. Daily trips are getting longer. Traffic is heavier. Taxes, fees, and utility bills are climbing as cities work to keep up with expanding infrastructure and services. These pressures are not isolated problems; they are the connected outcomes of how the region has grown.

At the same time, public obligations are increasing faster than the revenue needed to sustain them. Roads, water systems, and public services built for a smaller region now require constant expansion and maintenance. Left unaddressed, this pattern puts households under increasing financial strain and exposes local governments to long-term fiscal risk.

Housing markets, commuting patterns, water systems, and public infrastructure now operate at a regional scale, while decisions are made city by city. A housing shortage in one place increases commuting from another. Road investments in one jurisdiction affect congestion elsewhere. Utility capacity, water quality, and public services cross city boundaries whether planning does or not.

As growth has spread outward, adding homes and businesses across previously rural land, the region has consumed more acreage overall, making roads and pipes more expensive to operate and harder to manage. Infrastructure is extended farther, daily trips lengthen, and public investment is stretched thinner. Over time, this erodes affordability for households and stability for local budgets, creating a regional challenge that no single city can solve alone.

Directing Growth Wisely

The region can decide to make growth the solution, through coordinated effort and dedication to a shared vision.

The challenges facing Northwest Arkansas are not isolated. Housing costs, long commutes, infrastructure strain, and rising public expenses are the connected outcomes of how growth has unfolded across the region. Addressing any one issue on its own can bring short-term relief, but lasting improvement depends on how well these systems work together.

This strategy focuses on alignment: between housing and transportation, between land use and infrastructure, and between local decisions and regional impact. When growth is coordinated, it reduces pressure on businesses, households, and public budgets at the same time. When it is not, costs compound quietly and risks increase. The following sections of this document detail this misalignment, and show how to change the region's trajectory for a prosperous future.



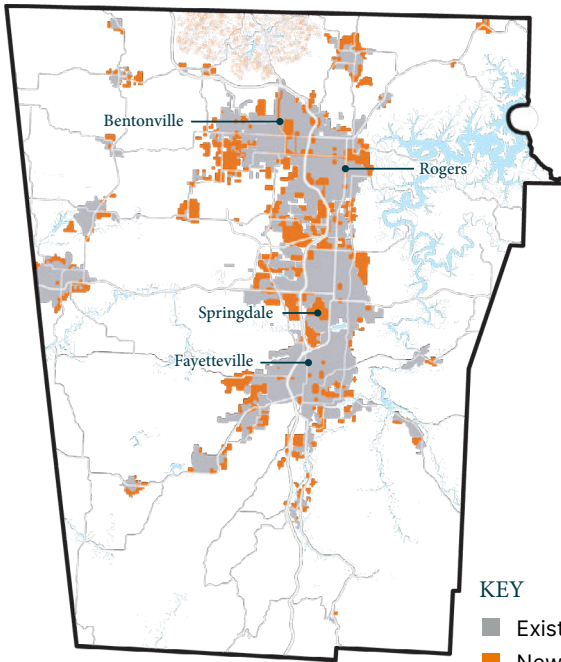
Growth potential at U.S. 62 and S Mock Street in Prairie Grove, focused on long-term gains.

The goal is not less growth, but growth that creates more places people cherish, healthier communities, and financial surplus.

The Bottom Line

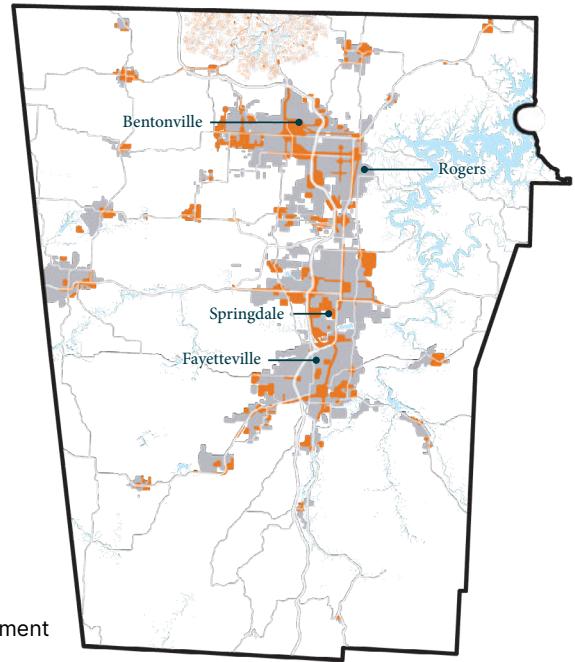
Current Trends

Dispersed growth strains public finances.



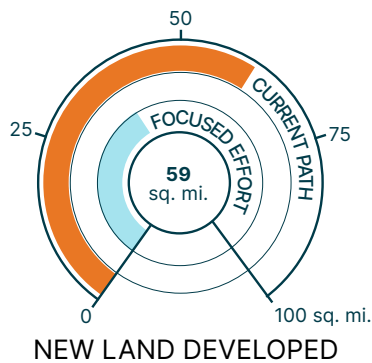
Strategic Change

Focused growth reduces long-term costs.



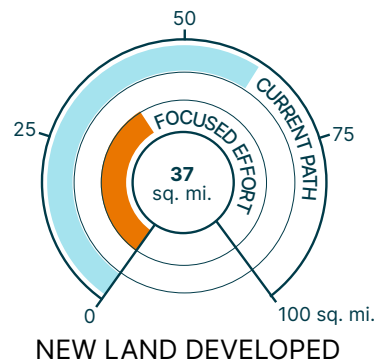
KEY

- Existing Development
- New Growth



EACH YEAR:

\$190 million new revenue
-\$170 million new costs
\$20 million left over



EACH YEAR:

\$470 million new revenue
-\$130 million new costs
\$340 million left over

DPZ CoDesign analyzed how much land Northwest Arkansas would consume if development continues under current zoning, growth patterns and development practices, and the corresponding financial implications. Using historic trends, existing regulations and population projections, the analysis correlated future land use with population increases. A second scenario modeled strategic change—a larger share of growth directed into compact, connected centers with moderate density increases where infrastructure already exists.

The difference is substantial. Continuing current patterns would consume about 59 additional square miles by 2050. A focused growth approach reduces that to roughly 37 square miles. Accounting for proactive upkeep of infrastructure, the strategic scenario generates an estimated \$340 million annual surplus that can be invested in mobility, public services, new infrastructure, and land conservation.

These six goals define the framework for shaping growth, investment, and stewardship across the region.

1. Anchor Growth in Regional Character

Focus growth into strong downtowns, new centers, and clearly defined communities so open land, working farms, and rural life remain lasting strengths. Prioritized centers support daily activity while protecting the landscapes that define the region.

2. Strengthen Community Resilience

Support financial stability by focusing growth where infrastructure and services already exist. Efficient land use lowers public costs and protects rural areas. Compact development shortens daily trips and generates reliable tax revenue to maintain community services.

3. Build Housing for Every Stage of Life

Provide a variety of housing types in every city so people can find homes and communities that fit their needs as their lives change. More options help lower costs, support the local workforce, and keep neighborhoods strong.

4. Make Everyday Travel Easier

Expand and connect streets, sidewalks, trails, and transit so people can reach work, school, and errands with shorter trips and more choices. Better connections, compact, and complete places reduce traffic and give everyone options for how they get around.

5. Leverage Water as a Shared Resource

Coordinate water, sewer, and stormwater systems to improve service, reduce redundancy, and plan more effectively for future growth. A regional approach lowers long-term costs, protects natural systems, and turns a growing challenge into a public asset.

6. Lead Together With Regional Governance

Work across cities, counties, organizations, and sectors to guide growth through shared planning and decision-making. Strong leadership and collaboration builds public trust, saves money, and supports long-term success.

Working Together for a Stronger Tomorrow

Growing Home: Protecting what is loved, growing community, and ensuring this special place will flourish.

Northwest Arkansas is growing, and with that growth comes a clear choice about the kind of future the region will create. This is a place people love for its natural beauty, close-knit communities, and sense of opportunity. The challenge, and **the opportunity**, is to guide growth in a way that **protects what makes the region special while improving everyday life** for the people who call it home.

A stronger future means housing that fits people through every stage of life, shorter and easier daily trips, and communities designed around connection rather than distance. It means encouraging growth that builds community health, enhances affordability, and strengthens local economies. Growth that directly addresses rising household costs, traffic congestion, and escalating long-term public expenses. By increasing development where infrastructure already exists and treating water as a shared regional resource, the region can grow more efficiently while protecting rural land and natural systems. **This vision is just as much financial as it is physical**; the two go hand-in-hand.

Success is rooted in working together. Growth crosses city lines, and so must leadership. Through shared planning, coordinated investment, and regional collaboration, Northwest Arkansas can move forward with confidence—**building a future that is connected, resilient, and financially strong for generations to come.**



The region's natural and rural character has been threatened by growth.

Anchor Growth in Regional Character

Focus growth into strong downtowns, new centers, and clearly defined communities so open land, working farms, and rural life remain lasting strengths.

Northwest Arkansas is defined by its small towns and open landscapes, not by its recent growth. Downtown squares, main streets, rural crossroads, and working lands carry the region's memory and identity. As growth accelerates, the risk is not simply that places change, but that they lose the patterns and relationships that make them recognizable. Without intention, new development can dilute character, separate neighbors, fragment rural land, and weaken the spaces that tie communities together.

Anchoring growth in regional character requires clarity about where growth belongs, how it interfaces with community, and how the region's qualities endure. This means doing two things at once: protecting the landscapes that define Northwest Arkansas, and intentionally building places where community life can thrive. Strong downtowns, main streets, well-planned new centers, and protected rural landscapes are not competing priorities. Together, they create a region that evolves without losing itself.

Squares are rooted in Arkansas history, centering communities throughout the state.



Fayetteville Square
Established 1829



Bentonville Town Square
Established 1836



Heber Springs Square
Established 1883

What Shapes Regional Character?

The region's character is shaped by its communities and the places that support them. Rural areas are defined by working lands and crossroads, while cities center on downtowns, main streets, and nearby neighborhoods. In both, these places bring people together and create a sense of community.

As Northwest Arkansas grows, more centers are needed to anchor daily life. Some existing centers are thriving, while others remain underused and need investment. At the same time, new development is often tied to outward expansion and rarely creates places for people to gather. This pattern leads to growth without community and increases pressure on rural landscapes.

Activating existing centers and building new ones in growing areas is essential to strengthen connections and identity. Without a coordinated approach, rural land will continue to be consumed, and new development will remain disconnected and incomplete.

Regional Character Emerges Through a Variety of Places

DOWNTOWNS AND CITY CENTERS



Employment, retail, dining, civic services, and regional events

MAIN STREETS



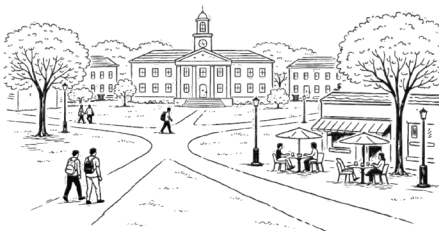
Local businesses, schools, services, and local commerce

NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS



Play, services, informal gathering, and local support uses

CAMPUSES



Education, employment, public services, civic life, and shared facilities

RURAL CROSSROADS



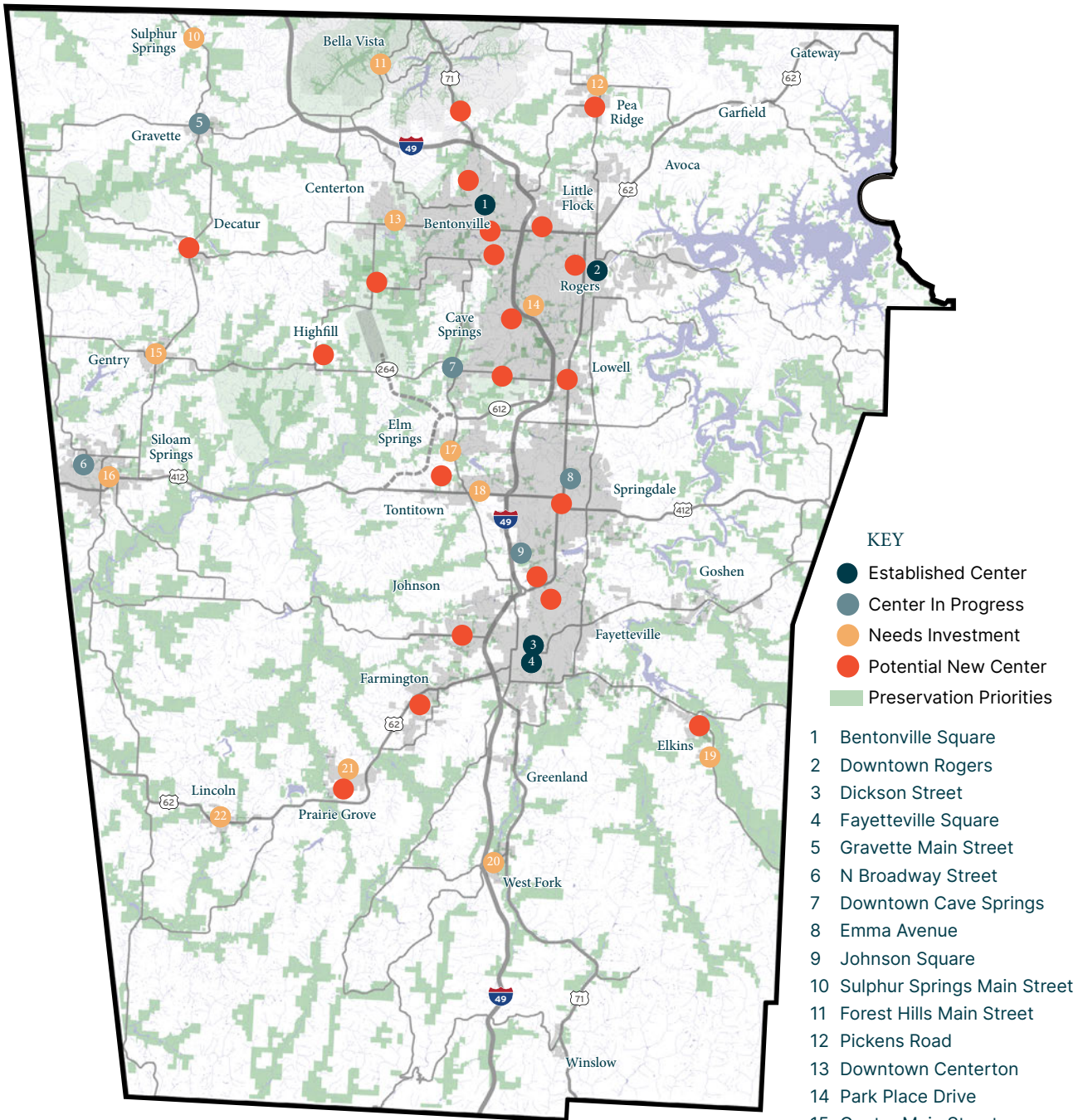
Basic services, informal gathering, and community facilities

WORKING LANDS



Agriculture, forests, and open landscapes that define the region

Growing With Character



DPZ reviewed development patterns across Northwest Arkansas and identified over 20 places that function as centers, or could fill this role with targeted investment. Another 20 were identified for future centers. Preservation begins with protecting the sensitive land priorities identified, and expands to working lands feeling pressure from outward growth.

Centers are not only opportunities for growth, they are opportunities to enhance the social fabric of the region. In many communities, small investments in streets, public spaces, and local businesses can transform overlooked areas into places where daily life happens. By focusing development into complete, connected places, the region can reduce pressure on rural landscapes, maintain agricultural viability, and preserve the open lands that define Northwest Arkansas.

Protecting Rural Land Requires Intentional Growth

Preserving rural character requires managing growth deliberately so farms and rural communities remain intact.

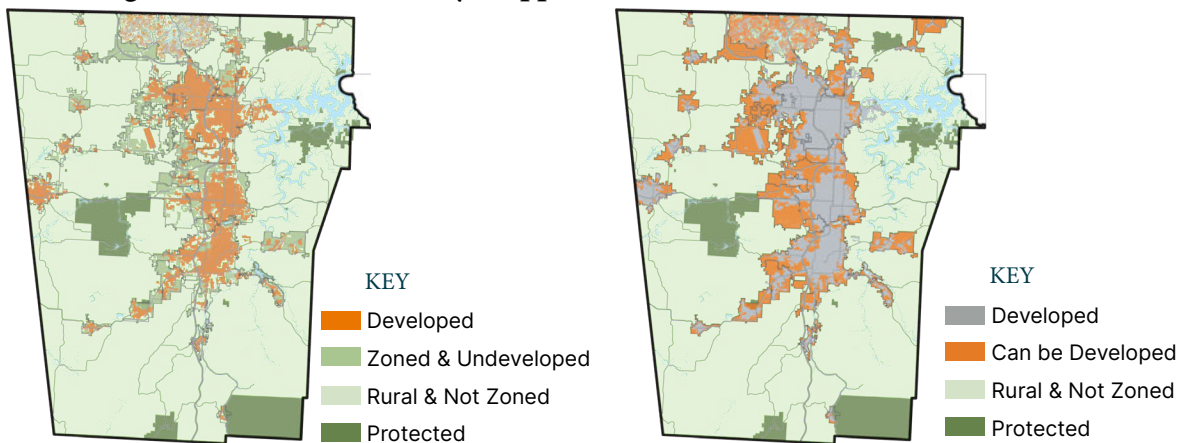
Across Northwest Arkansas, rural land is under increasing pressure from encroaching growth. As subdivisions extend beyond city edges, often following new roads and utility extensions, they reshape landscapes that have long supported agriculture and rural life. These patterns fragment working lands, create conflicts with rural ways of life, and make farming difficult to sustain. At the same time, Northwest Arkansas residents consistently identify natural beauty and rural character as the region's most important qualities to protect.

Farmers and rural landowners operate within this tension. Many rely on the long-term value of their land, including the option to sell when needed, even as growth disrupts agricultural operations and rural patterns. These pressures come as rural communities face long-term challenges. Farm consolidation, loss of local services, and broader economic shifts have impacted the people and institutions that sustain rural life.

Managing growth is not a rural responsibility. It should be a responsibility for the region to collectively address. Decisions about growth policy and infrastructure investments determine whether rural land remains intact or is gradually converted.

Preservation tools, such as conservation programs and targeted land protection, can help, but they have limited reach on their own. Lasting protection also depends on how growth is directed. By focusing development into existing communities and limiting outward infrastructure expansion, cities and counties can reduce pressure on rural land and support long-term agricultural viability.

Future Stages of Growth are Already Mapped



PlaceMakers evaluated existing zoning districts compiled in geographic information system format by Crafton Tull. Land within city boundaries with agricultural zoning is a temporary condition—it is planned for future growth. These maps show the current extent of development and long-term city land reservations for development.

Source: NWARPC, Benton and Washington counties, Northwest Arkansas cities, State of AR GIS Office

Why Character Protection Matters for Northwest Arkansas

Conserving land and creating places for community go hand-in-hand.

Compact growth is not just a preference, it is a safeguard. Without it, outward expansion will consume farmland, degrade natural systems, and weaken the rural economies and landscapes that define Northwest Arkansas. Over time, this pattern replaces productive land with dispersed development, raises long-term public costs, and leaves rural and urban areas less connected and less resilient.

Retaining what makes the region distinct requires coordination. Land-use policy, conservation efforts, and infrastructure investment must work together to define where growth belongs and where it should not occur. Conservation tools can protect priority lands, but their impact depends

on development policies and infrastructure decisions that reinforce those boundaries rather than undermine them.

At the same time, cities must invest in places that bring people together. Strengthening downtowns, main streets, and neighborhood centers ensures that growth builds community rather than dispersing it. Focusing growth in these areas deepens community connections while reducing pressure to expand outward. Together, these actions create a balanced region, where rural lands remain intact and communities grow in ways that are connected, durable, and true to the region's identity.

Key Outcomes

Protect Agricultural Lands

Provide financial incentives, conservation programs, and voluntary tools that help landowners keep farmland in production. Measure progress by acres of agricultural land in conservation.

Preserve Natural Systems

Reduce the rate of consumption of streams, forests, and sensitive land by clearly defining growth areas and conserving priority landscapes. Measure progress by acres of sensitive land in conservation.

Strengthen Community Centers

Increase the number and quality of compact centers, where residents can access daily needs and gather. Measure progress by business concentration, mix, and income.

Increase Access to Public Gathering Spaces

Expand access to centers and parks within walking distance of neighborhoods to support community life and social connection. Measure progress by the Trust for Public Land's Park Score and the percentage of residents within 1/2 mile of centers and parks.

Reduce Land Consumption

Reduce the land consumed by each new home and business. Measure progress by average density of residential development permit and acres of rural land developed.

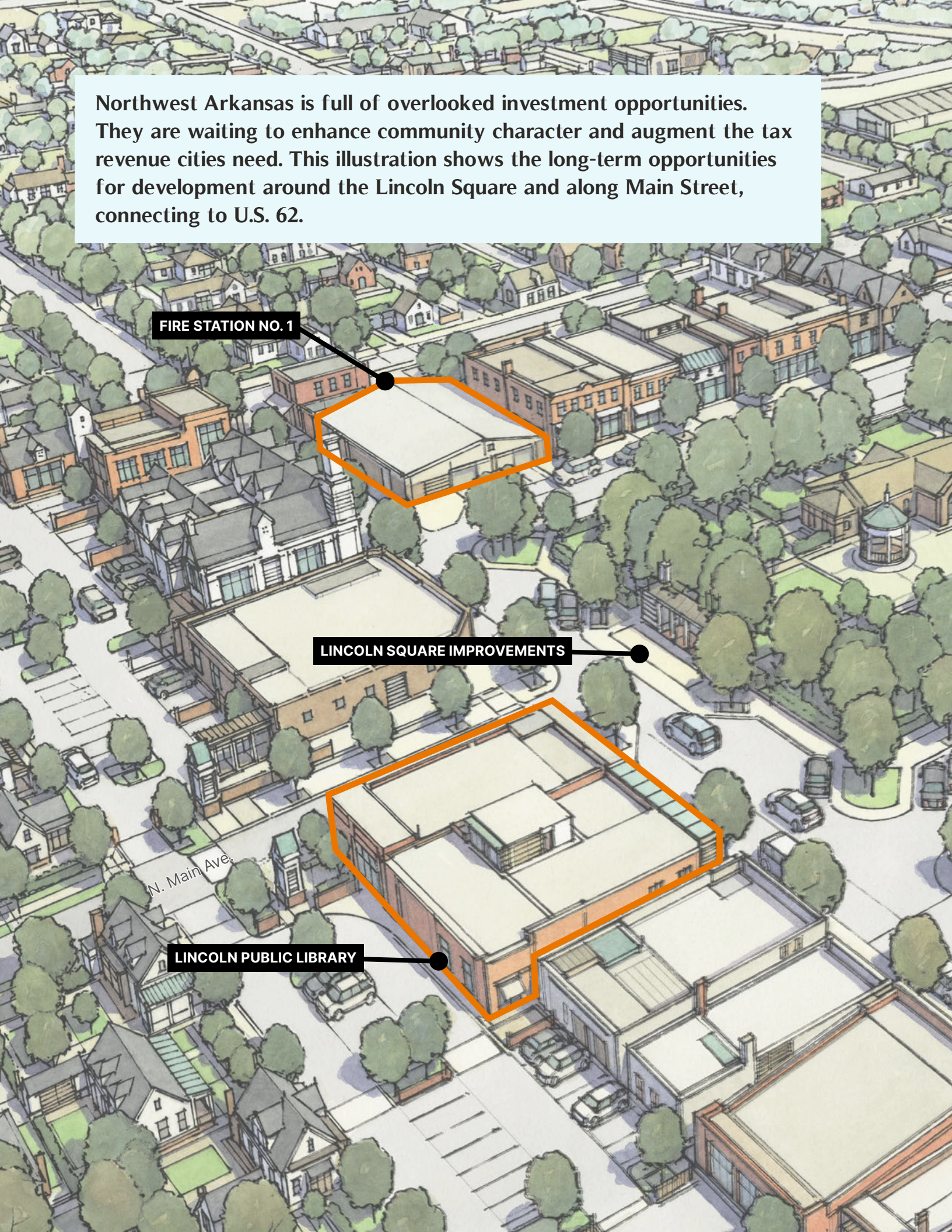
Northwest Arkansas is full of overlooked investment opportunities. They are waiting to enhance community character and augment the tax revenue cities need. This illustration shows the long-term opportunities for development around the Lincoln Square and along Main Street, connecting to U.S. 62.

FIRE STATION NO. 1

LINCOLN SQUARE IMPROVEMENTS

LINCOLN PUBLIC LIBRARY

N. Main Ave.





U.S. 62

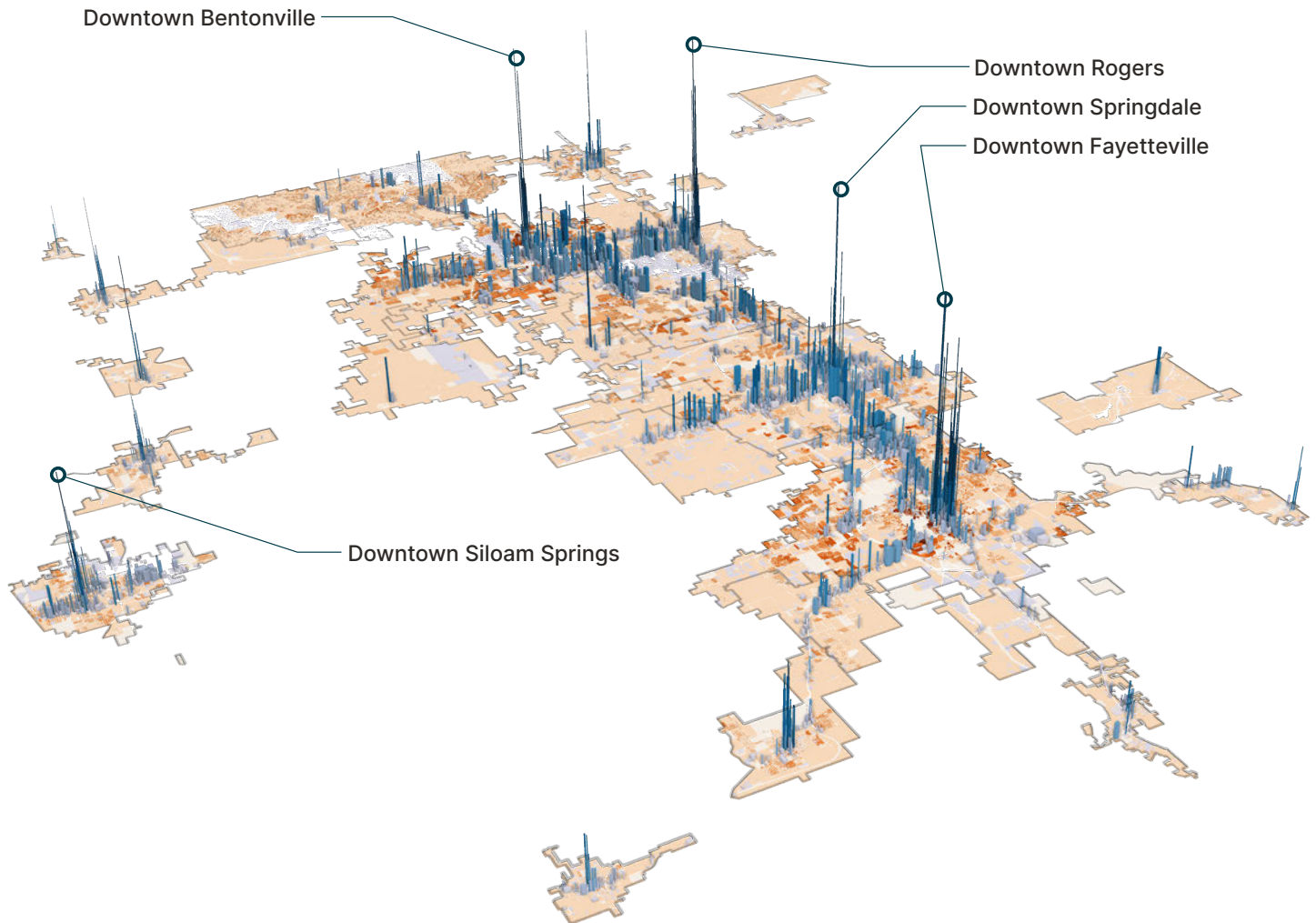
NEW DEVELOPMENT ON MAIN AVE

East Bean St.



Targeted investments could transform Lincoln's center: its City Square and Main Street.

Sales and property tax revenues pay for infrastructure, schools, and city services. Facing tight budgets, maintenance backlogs, and growing resident needs, cities need to maximize returns from their most valuable asset: land.



Tax Generation Within Cities

The spikes on this map show sales and property tax revenue per acre based on an Urban3 financial analysis conducted for this report. Taller spikes indicate land generating more public revenue per acre.

Across Northwest Arkansas, the highest concentrations appear in the downtowns of Fayetteville, Springdale, Rogers, Bentonville, and Siloam Springs, where compact blocks of homes, shops, and offices produce strong returns from small parcels. These places help fund parks, streets, and city services.

The map also highlights challenges for rapidly growing cities such as Centerton and Tontitown, where strengthening walkable centers and local commercial districts will be important for building the tax base needed to support infrastructure and services.

Strengthen Community Resilience

Focus growth where roads, utilities, and public services already exist so communities can remain affordable, healthy, and financially stable over time.

Northwest Arkansas has invested billions over decades in roads, water systems, parks, schools, and public services. These systems are long-term commitments that must be maintained, repaired, and eventually replaced. When growth spreads outward without regard to capacity, communities bear dual financial obligations: first to extend infrastructure, and again to sustain a larger network of systems than the tax base can reliably support.

Directing more growth to places where infrastructure already exists keeps past investments working longer and harder. It lowers the cost of serving each household, supports reliable services, and makes daily access to jobs, parks, and essential destinations easier. Financially productive growth does more than protect budgets. It shapes healthier routines, shortens daily trips, and builds communities that are more sociable and easier to maintain over time.

Financial Productivity Varies by Building Type

Urban3's analysis compares the average taxable value per acre of land for common building types in Northwest Arkansas.



\$500,000 / Acre
Suburban Single-Family



\$600,000 / Acre
Downtown Single-Family



\$1 M / Acre
Suburban Multi-Family



\$1.9 M / Acre
Downtown Mixed Use



\$800,000 / Acre
Suburban Commercial



\$1.1 M / Acre
Downtown Commercial

Growth Carries Long-Term Obligations

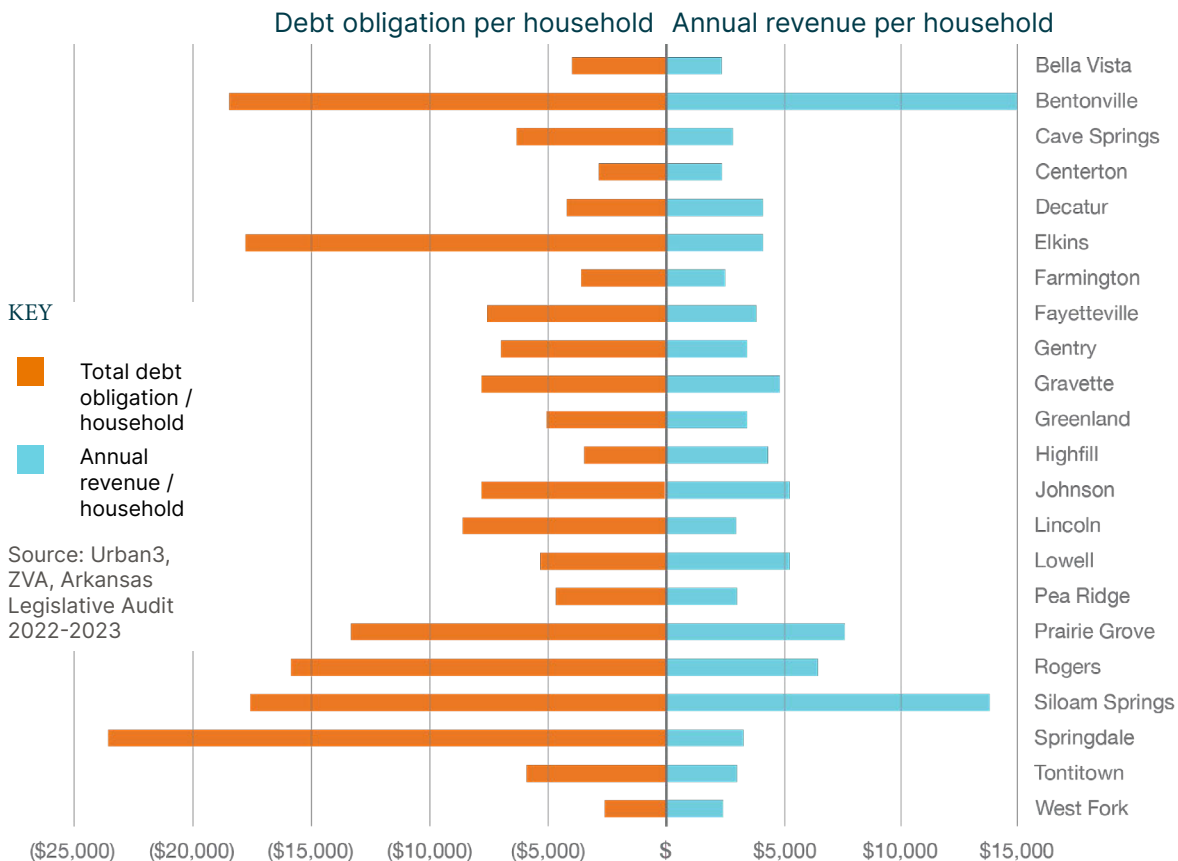
Every new mile of street, pipe, and service becomes a permanent financial commitment.

Growth adds long-term obligations in the form of streets, pipes, and treatment systems that must be operated, maintained, and eventually replaced. It also requires more public services such as police, fire, libraries, and parks, each of which means staff, equipment, and facilities. Communities from Bentonville and Rogers to Farmington and Prairie Grove have expanded rapidly, extending miles of new roads, water lines, sewer infrastructure, and community services for new neighborhoods. Every extension becomes a permanent commitment that cities must fund.

The strain is visible in parts of the region's infrastructure systems. Wastewater capacity has slowed development in several communities while treatment plants and interceptor lines are expanded. At the same time, many cities are pursuing grants and issuing bonds to upgrade utilities and rebuild streets.

The chart below compares total city debt with annual revenue per household. In many Northwest Arkansas cities, long-term obligations are growing faster than the tax base available to maintain them, creating fiscal pressure that compounds over time if not addressed.

Infrastructure and Maintenance Costs Add Up

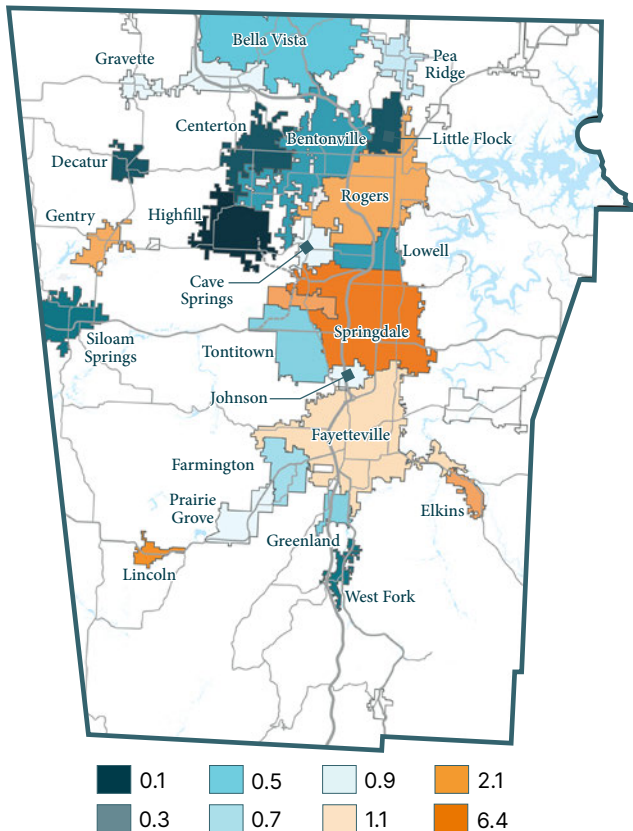


Where Pressure is Showing First

Wastewater capacity is often the first signal that infrastructure systems are reaching their limits. In parts of Northwest Arkansas, treatment plants and sewer interceptors must be expanded before additional development can proceed. When capacity tightens, housing supply slows and prices rise while taxes and utility fees increase to pay for needed upgrades. Transportation shows a similar pattern at a regional scale. Households across Northwest Arkansas spend roughly **\$3 billion** each year on transportation, including fuel, vehicle ownership, insurance, and other travel costs according to Center for Neighborhood Technology's H+T Index.

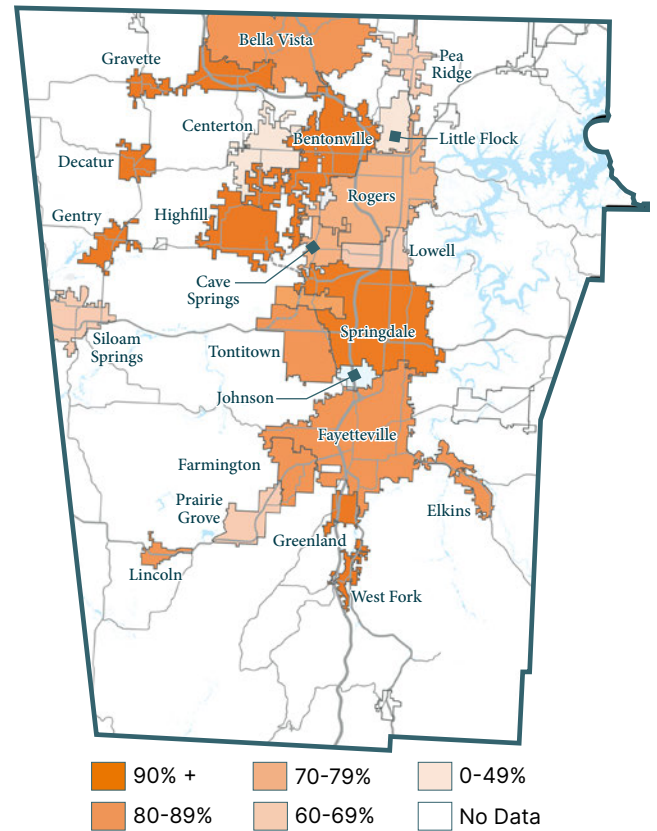
These expenses reflect a system shaped by distance and limited connectivity. As development spreads outward, more lane miles and pipes must be built and maintained while residents travel farther for daily needs. Over time, maintenance needs exceed revenue and grow municipal debt, reducing flexibility and increasing long-term financial risk.

Municipal Debt Ratios



Municipal debt ratio compares total outstanding debt to annual revenue. Ratios above 1 indicate debt exceeds yearly revenue; ratios below 1 indicate stronger fiscal capacity.

Municipal Street Funding Gap



Street maintenance funding gaps show accumulated deferred obligations. The difference between annualized long-term obligations and current spending represents maintenance debt that grows each year costs are postponed.

Source: Urban3, Arkansas Legislative Audit 2022-2023

Growth That Pays its Way

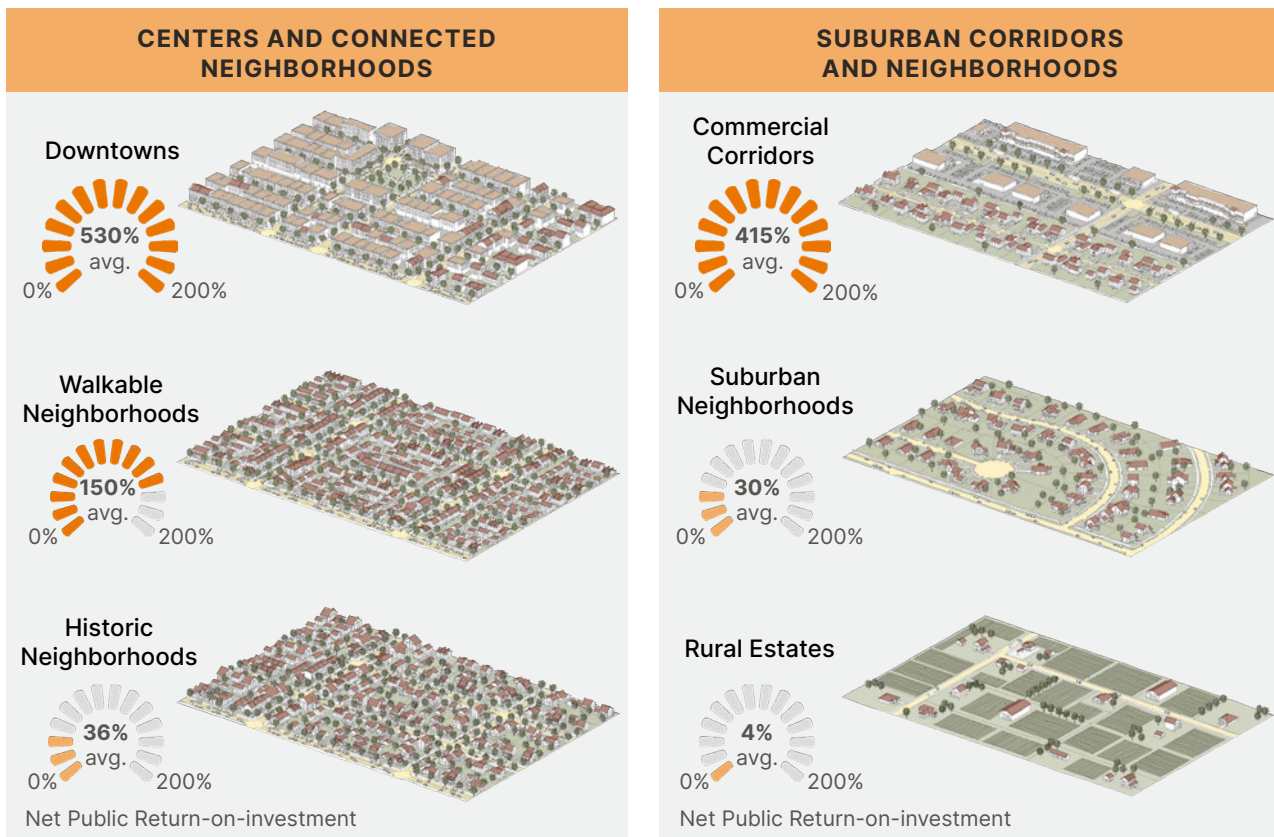
Resilient regions treat land use like a balance sheet.

Development patterns shape a community's financial position as clearly as fiscal policy. When growth produces value that exceeds its costs, budgets can support expanded services like parks and libraries. When it does not, budgets tighten, debt increases, and long-term investments are deferred. These effects are structural and accumulate over time.

Regions that align land use with transportation and infrastructure capacity manage costs more predictably and generate stronger revenues. This improves fiscal stability and can lower borrowing costs, as credit agencies consider revenue strength and infrastructure burden when assessing risk.

At a regional scale, coordinated growth reduces duplication, aligns capital investments, and supports more effective financing. The result is greater flexibility to reinvest and respond to change. Regions that achieve this turn infrastructure into a platform for growth, and financial discipline into a competitive advantage.

Public Return-on-Investment by Development Type



Urban3 and DPZ compared net revenue for existing downtowns, commercial corridors, and neighborhoods across Northwest Arkansas, considering sales tax, property tax, infrastructure maintenance, and public services. Places with commercial uses provide a net return, which is increased where both commercial and residential uses are mixed, such as the region's historic downtowns.

Why Financial Resilience Matters for Northwest Arkansas

Financial resilience comes from places that return more than they cost.

For Northwest Arkansas, these dynamics are not theoretical. The region's growth trajectory, infrastructure commitments, and capital needs are converging at a scale that will define financial performance for decades. Choices about where and how growth occurs will shape not only service reliability and tax stability, but also the region's ability to fund future priorities and respond to emerging needs.

Fiscally resilient development patterns allow communities to grow while preserving the revenue needed to maintain and expand infrastructure and services over time. They strengthen credit positions, supporting lower-cost access to capital, and reduce exposure to sudden infrastructure failures or service

disruptions. Over time, these patterns build a more stable fiscal foundation that can support both day-to-day operations and long-term investments.

Absent this alignment, rising obligations can outpace revenue, eroding debt capacity and forcing difficult trade-offs between maintenance, expansion, and public priorities.

Deferred maintenance and fragmented growth can compound these challenges, increasing long-term costs. This is the difference between growth that compounds value and growth that compounds risk. Regions that recognize and act on this relationship secure long-term flexibility to respond to both planned growth and unexpected demands.

Key Outcomes

Lower Long-Term Public Costs

Growth that reduces per-household infrastructure and service obligations over time. Measure progress by the average linear foot of street and pipe per household.

Reduced Fiscal Exposure

Development that generates enough value to cover long-term infrastructure obligations without deferred maintenance or unplanned capital spending. Measure progress by municipal infrastructure spending as a percent of revenue.

Sustained Service Capacity

Infrastructure and services that maintain performance standards as communities grow, without service degradation, shortfalls, or fee hikes. Measurements specified in the water and infrastructure chapter.

Greater Capital Flexibility

A wider margin between revenue and long-term obligations allows communities to time investments strategically, address maintenance proactively, and respond to change without destabilizing public finances. Measure progress by municipal debt as a percent of revenue.

SHIELDED PARKING

NEW HOUSING & SHOPS

ADVANCED BUS STOPS

CIVIC "SQUARE-ABOUT"

West Walnut Street



An aerial architectural rendering of a city street intersection. The scene shows a mix of multi-story buildings, trees, and pedestrian paths. Three callout boxes with black backgrounds and white text are connected to the scene by black lines. The first box, 'WALNUT STREET IMPROVEMENTS', points to a street on the left. The second box, 'AT&T', points to a large, rectangular building outlined in orange in the upper right. The third box, 'PRIORITY BIKEWAYS', points to a green-paved path with trees in the center. In the lower right, a street is labeled 'S. Eighth Street'.

WALNUT STREET IMPROVEMENTS

AT&T

PRIORITY BIKEWAYS

S. Eighth Street

U.S. 71 Business is lined with parking lots and low-scale buildings that don't deliver the tax revenue or community-centered character that the region's downtowns provide. Building more in these "greyfield" areas brings multiple benefits: more revenue, fewer added utility and service costs, places for community, reduced congestion, and increased public health. This example at Walnut and Eighth streets in Rogers extends downtown to meet the future bus rapid transit line, boosting the financial success of Rogers and the transit system.



Imagined future complete neighborhood in Gravette, providing housing choice and location efficiency.

Build Housing for Every Stage of Life

Build communities with housing options that support people across life stages, sustain schools, bolster businesses, and enrich community life.

People's lives change over time. Households grow, shrink, age, and adapt as work, family, and health needs evolve. The places people call home should be able to adapt with them, offering housing options that support stages of life and ranges of budgets.

Too often, neighborhoods offer a narrow set of housing choices. Families may want to move into a community for its jobs, short commutes, strong schools, or proximity to family and friends, yet cannot find a home that fits their needs or budget. Others already living there may need a different type of home as their lives change, such as older adults looking to downsize or growing families needing more space. They can be forced to leave when those options are unavailable. These gaps affect more than individuals. They shape school enrollment, limit businesses' ability to attract and retain a diverse workforce, and weaken the long-term health of local institutions.

Strong communities balance stability with healthy turnover. When neighborhoods offer a mix of housing sizes, types, and price points, people can move within the community as their needs change, opening homes for new residents while maintaining social ties. This flexibility supports stable schools, expands the local labor pool, and strengthens businesses and community life. Housing that serves multiple stages of life allows communities to adapt and remain resilient over time.

Homes for Every Stage of Life



Young Adults



Families



Empty Nesters

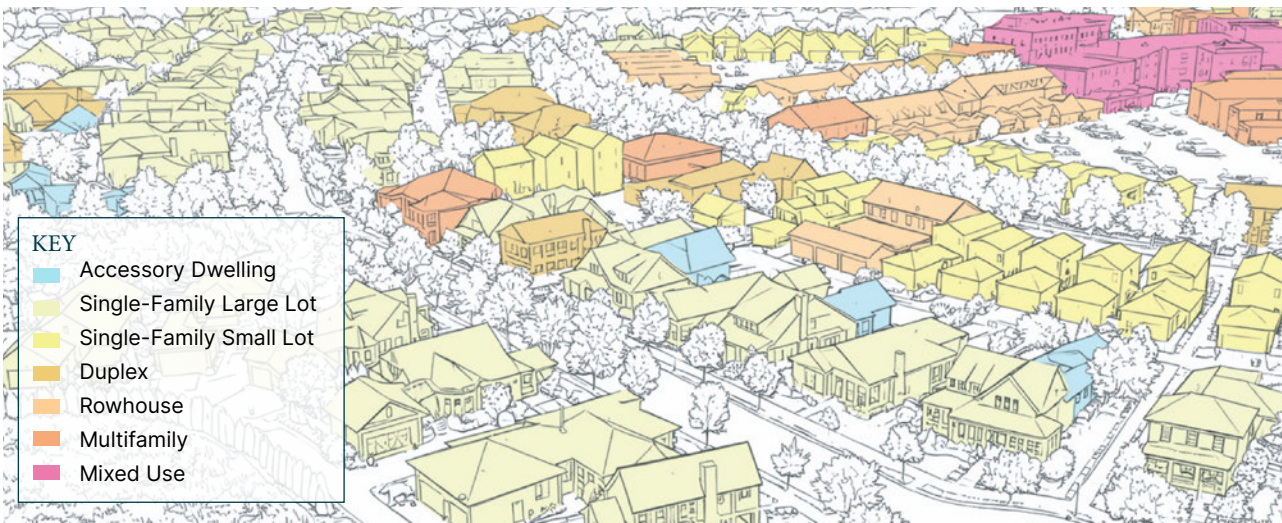


Elderly

Housing Variety That Fits Together

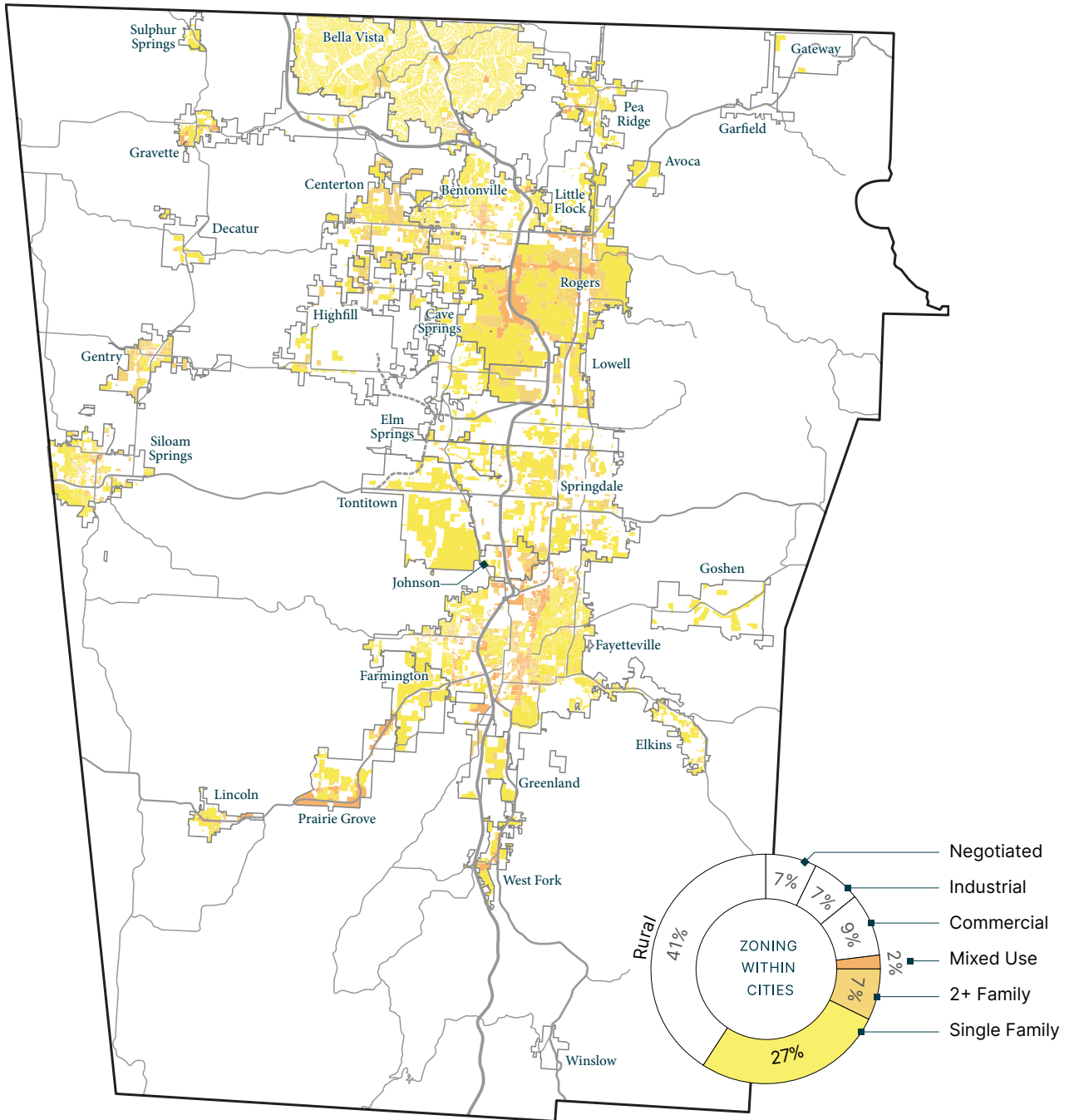
Neighborhood character comes from how buildings relate to the street and to each other, not from limiting housing to a single type or price. Homes can differ in size, layout, and cost while still fitting comfortably side by side. When new housing respects height and scale, it feels like a natural part of the neighborhood. This compatibility allows people at different stages of life to live there without disrupting what residents value, preserving a shared sense of place over time.

Neighborhoods That Mix Homes Harmoniously



The neighborhood of Norton Commons near Louisville, Kentucky, shown above, demonstrates how different housing types can fit together comfortably when designed with compatible scale and placement. Small and larger houses, duplexes, townhomes, and small apartments are scaled and oriented toward the street in similar ways, creating a cohesive environment rather than a crowded one. This approach allows people of different ages, incomes, and household sizes to live near one another, much like the mix of homes found near the historic downtowns of Bentonville and Fayetteville.

Neighborhoods are Shaped by Rules



This map shows where housing is currently permitted across Northwest Arkansas. Only zones that allow residential development by right are colored, while rural land and nonresidential zones are omitted. Regionally, of all the land that is zoned, the largest percentage is zoned exclusively for single-family housing. Because most residential land allows only one housing type, neighborhoods have limited ability to adapt as households change. Smaller homes, duplexes, townhomes, and apartments often require special approvals or are confined to limited areas. Over time, this reduces housing choice, making it harder for neighborhoods to accommodate different household sizes, incomes, and stages of life.

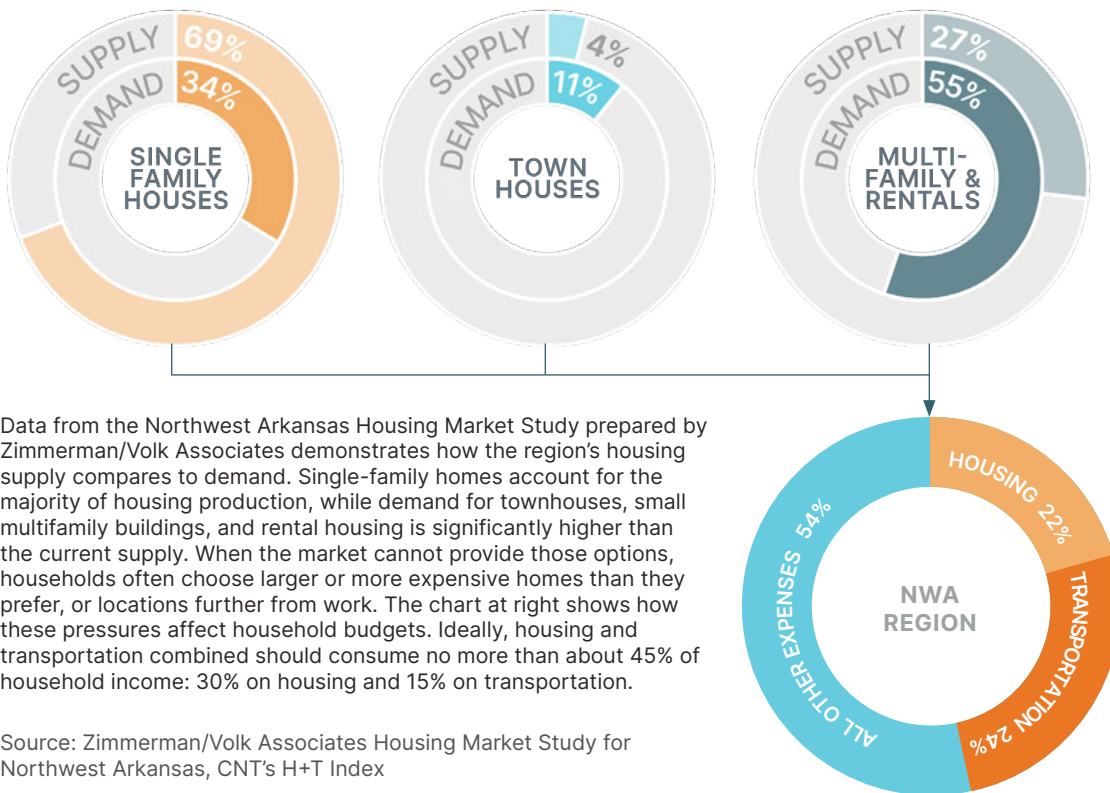
Source: NWARPC, Benton and Washington counties, Northwest Arkansas cities, State of AR GIS Office

Aligning Rules and Financing

Reducing housing and transportation costs in Northwest Arkansas requires aligning how the region regulates, finances, and builds homes. The metro area has added hundreds of thousands of residents over the past two decades and is projected to approach one million people by mid century. To keep up with that growth, the region will likely need to produce 9,000 to 10,000 new housing units each year. Today, production averages 6,000 to 7,000 units annually, creating a growing gap between supply and demand.

The region's housing construction is concentrated in Bentonville, Rogers, Springdale, and Fayetteville, where jobs and infrastructure are strongest. At the same time, rapidly developing communities such as Centerton, Lowell, Pea Ridge, and Prairie Grove are adding residents quickly but often have fewer housing options beyond single-family subdivisions. Aligning zoning rules, financing tools, and development practices can help the region increase overall production while also expanding the range of housing types available near jobs, schools, and services.

Housing Supply Gaps Increase Household Costs



Data from the Northwest Arkansas Housing Market Study prepared by Zimmerman/Volk Associates demonstrates how the region's housing supply compares to demand. Single-family homes account for the majority of housing production, while demand for townhouses, small multifamily buildings, and rental housing is significantly higher than the current supply. When the market cannot provide those options, households often choose larger or more expensive homes than they prefer, or locations further from work. The chart at right shows how these pressures affect household budgets. Ideally, housing and transportation combined should consume no more than about 45% of household income: 30% on housing and 15% on transportation.

Source: Zimmerman/Volk Associates Housing Market Study for Northwest Arkansas, CNT's H+T Index

Why H+T Matters for Northwest Arkansas

Housing and transportation costs rise and fall together.

Housing choice is essential for affordability, but it cannot be separated from how people move through the region. Housing and transportation costs are linked, and for many households they are roughly equal. Lower housing prices on the edge of the region are offset by longer commutes and increased fuel and service costs. When housing options are limited near jobs, schools, and daily needs, households are forced to trade one cost for another, often without realizing the full impact.

What may appear affordable at purchase becomes more expensive over time when both housing and transportation costs burden household budgets.

Expanding housing options in well-located areas changes this equation. Allowing a wider range of homes near jobs, schools, and major corridors shortens trips, reduces transportation costs, and improves access to employment. These patterns also make better use of existing infrastructure and support transit and active transportation.

Over time, aligning housing and transportation decisions strengthens household and public finances. Shorter trips reduce daily costs and improve quality of life. More efficient land use increases tax revenue and lowers infrastructure obligations, helping Northwest Arkansas grow in a more affordable, connected, and resilient way.

Key Outcomes

Expanded Housing Choice

Increase the share of small homes, duplexes, triplexes, townhouses, condos, and apartments. Measure progress by the share of annual permits for each housing type, by city.

Housing Cost Stability

Reduce housing cost volatility by increasing supply in high-demand areas and narrowing the gap between housing cost growth and income growth. Measure progress by the gap between median income and housing cost, for owners and renters.

Lower Commute Cost

Reduce average commute time and household transportation costs by increasing housing options near jobs, schools, and daily services. Measure progress by household transportation cost as a percent of income.

Reduce Forced Moves

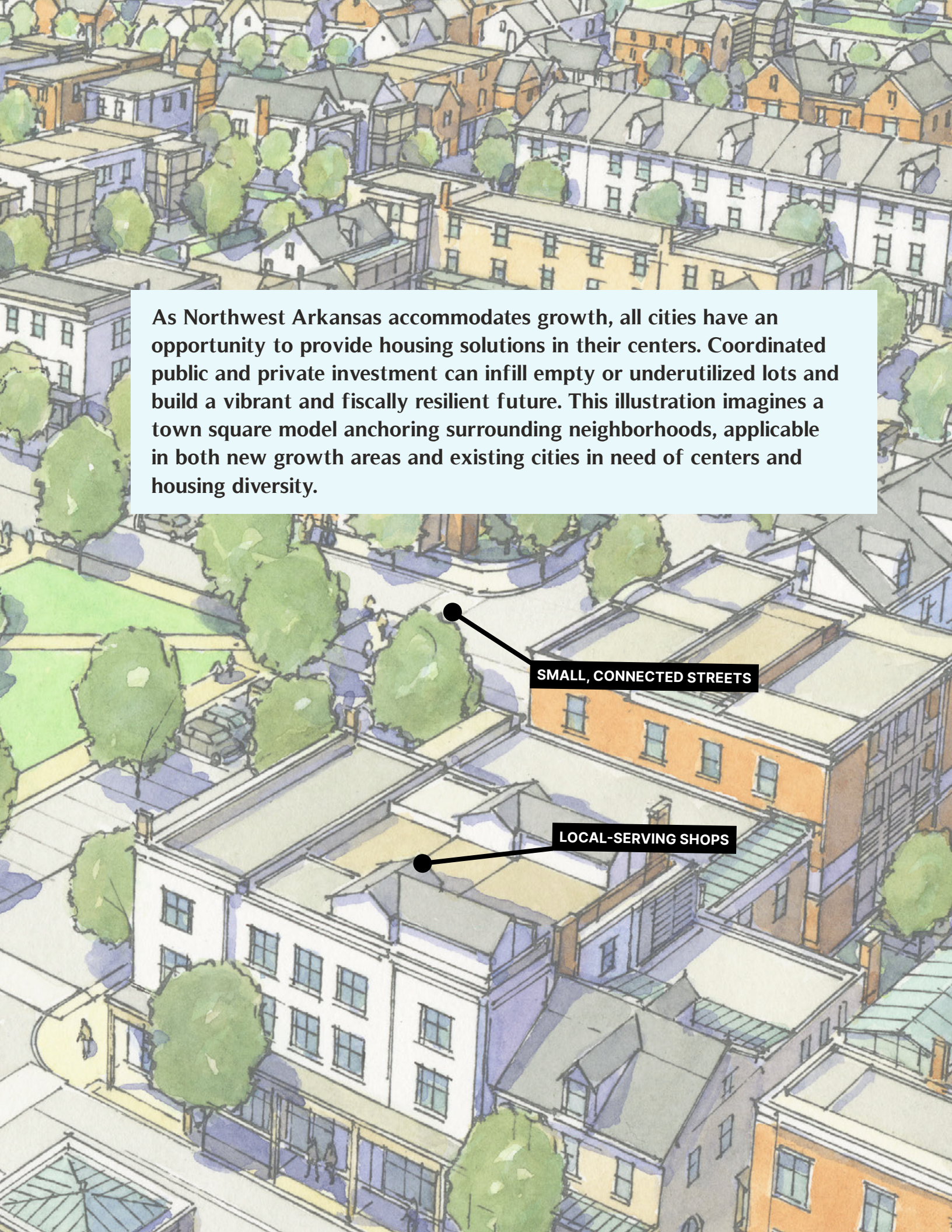
Lower involuntary household moves by expanding housing options that let residents stay in-community as needs and budgets change. Measure progress by relocation rates within the same city, county, and region.



MIXTURE OF HOUSING OPTIONS

CITY SQUARE

CIVIC INSTITUTION



As Northwest Arkansas accommodates growth, all cities have an opportunity to provide housing solutions in their centers. Coordinated public and private investment can infill empty or underutilized lots and build a vibrant and fiscally resilient future. This illustration imagines a town square model anchoring surrounding neighborhoods, applicable in both new growth areas and existing cities in need of centers and housing diversity.



SMALL, CONNECTED STREETS

LOCAL-SERVING SHOPS



Imagined future for Eighth Street near Walnut Street, in Rogers.

Make Everyday Travel Easier

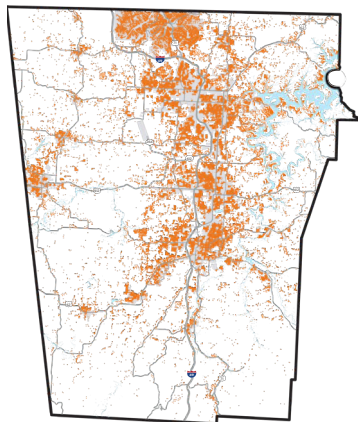
Expand and connect streets, sidewalks, trails, and transit so people can reach work, school, and errands with shorter trips and more choices.

Everyday destinations like work, school, and shopping in Northwest Arkansas are farther apart than they used to be, turning simple errands into long trips. Congestion is the visible symptom, but the deeper issue is how communities are laid out and connected. When homes, jobs, and services are spread farther apart, households are forced to spend more time and money getting around, increasing the combined cost of housing and transportation.

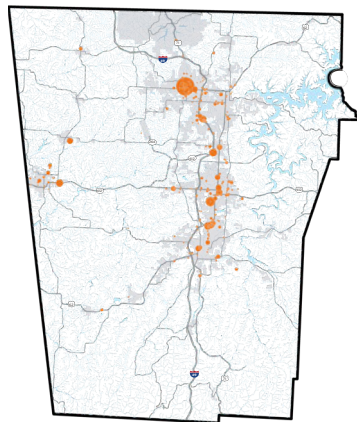
When places are closer together and better linked, people don't have to travel as far or rely on just one way to get there. A well connected network of streets, sidewalks, trails, and transit gives people real choices, whether they drive, walk, bike, or ride. Shorter trips mean lower transportation costs and more flexibility in daily life.

Making everyday travel easier isn't about one solution. It means shaping communities so daily needs are closer together, while building a transportation network that works well for everyone.

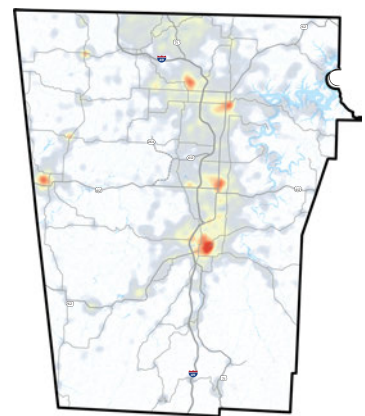
More Connections Not Larger Roads



Where people live



Where they work



Where the roads are connected

Source: Benton and Washington County Assessors, Arkansas Department of Transportation, Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission

Concentrating Traffic

Limited connections increase congestion.

A connected transportation network works best when each part plays its role. Interstates are meant to carry long distance travel and freight, while major roads connect cities and job centers. Local streets handle everyday trips such as getting to school, the store, or a neighbor's house. When these layers work together, traffic spreads across the network instead of concentrating in a few places.

Across Northwest Arkansas, many daily trips are forced onto major corridors because local connections are limited. Congestion is common not only on I-49 but also on key routes such as Walton Boulevard and SE 14th Street in Bentonville, Pleasant Grove Road in Rogers, Sunset Avenue in Springdale, and College Avenue in Fayetteville. These roads carry both regional traffic and short local trips because nearby streets often do not connect.

When more local routes are available, people can reach nearby destinations without entering the busiest corridors. A connected network reduces pressure everywhere by giving traffic more paths, not bigger bottlenecks.

Street Network Types

DISTRIBUTED GRIDS



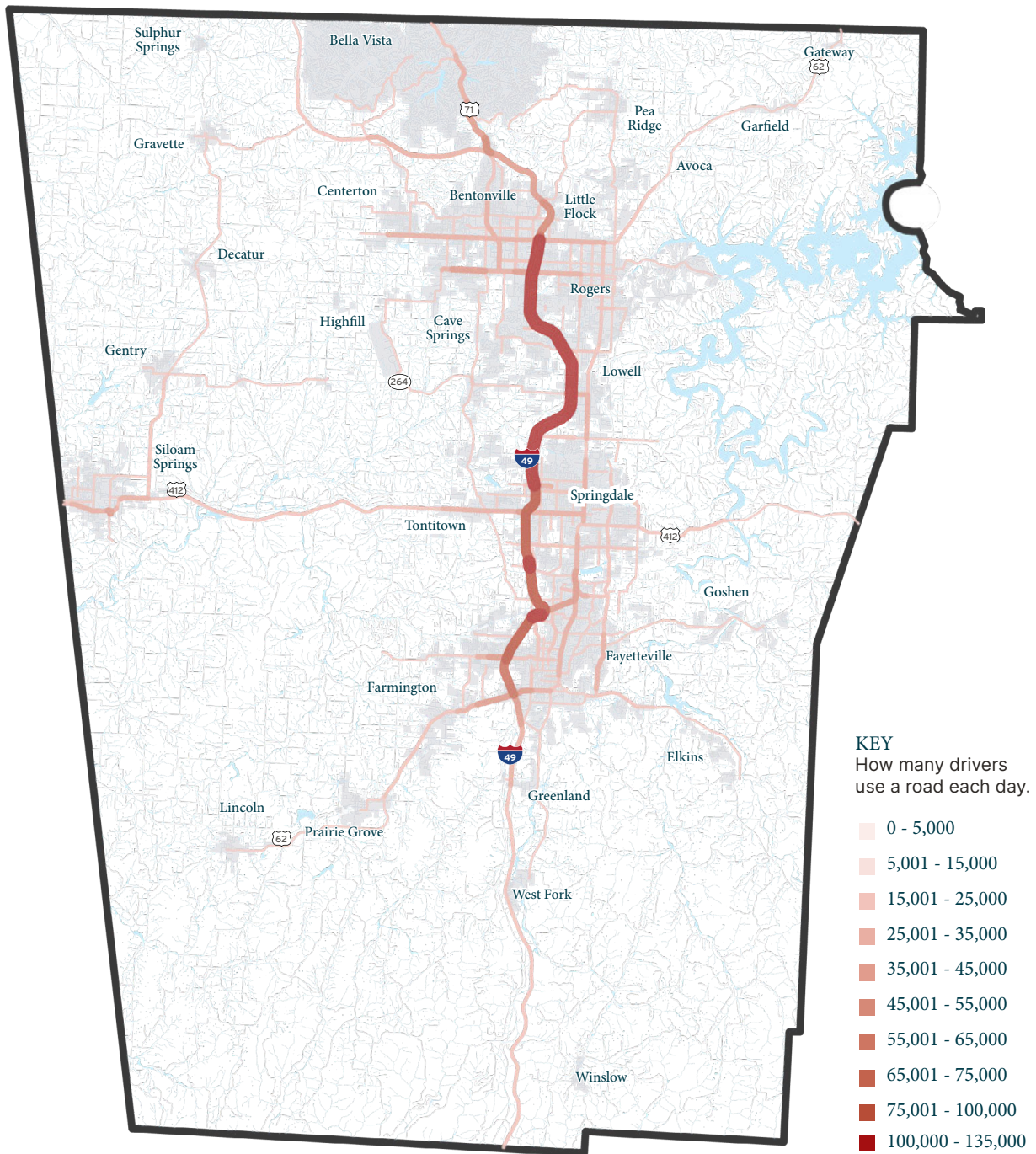
Connected street networks give drivers multiple ways to reach nearby destinations. Most daily trips can happen on local streets without needing to enter the region's busiest corridors. Major roads still carry regional traffic, but they are not overloaded with short neighborhood trips.

BRANCHING NETWORKS



Branching street patterns funnel most trips onto a few large roads. Even short trips to nearby stores, schools, or parks often require drivers to reach an arterial or highway first. This concentrates traffic on major corridors and creates congestion at key intersections.

Busiest Routes in the Region



The map above highlights where congestion is already appearing across Northwest Arkansas. Delays are common not only on the interstate but also on key regional routes such as U.S. 71B, U.S. 412 through Tontitown and Springdale, and Arkansas Highway 102 serving Centerton and west Bentonville. Many of these highways now carry both regional travel and short local trips because nearby neighborhoods lack connected streets. As population continues to grow in places like Centerton, Pea Ridge, and Prairie Grove, expanding local connections will be critical to keep traffic from concentrating on the same corridors.

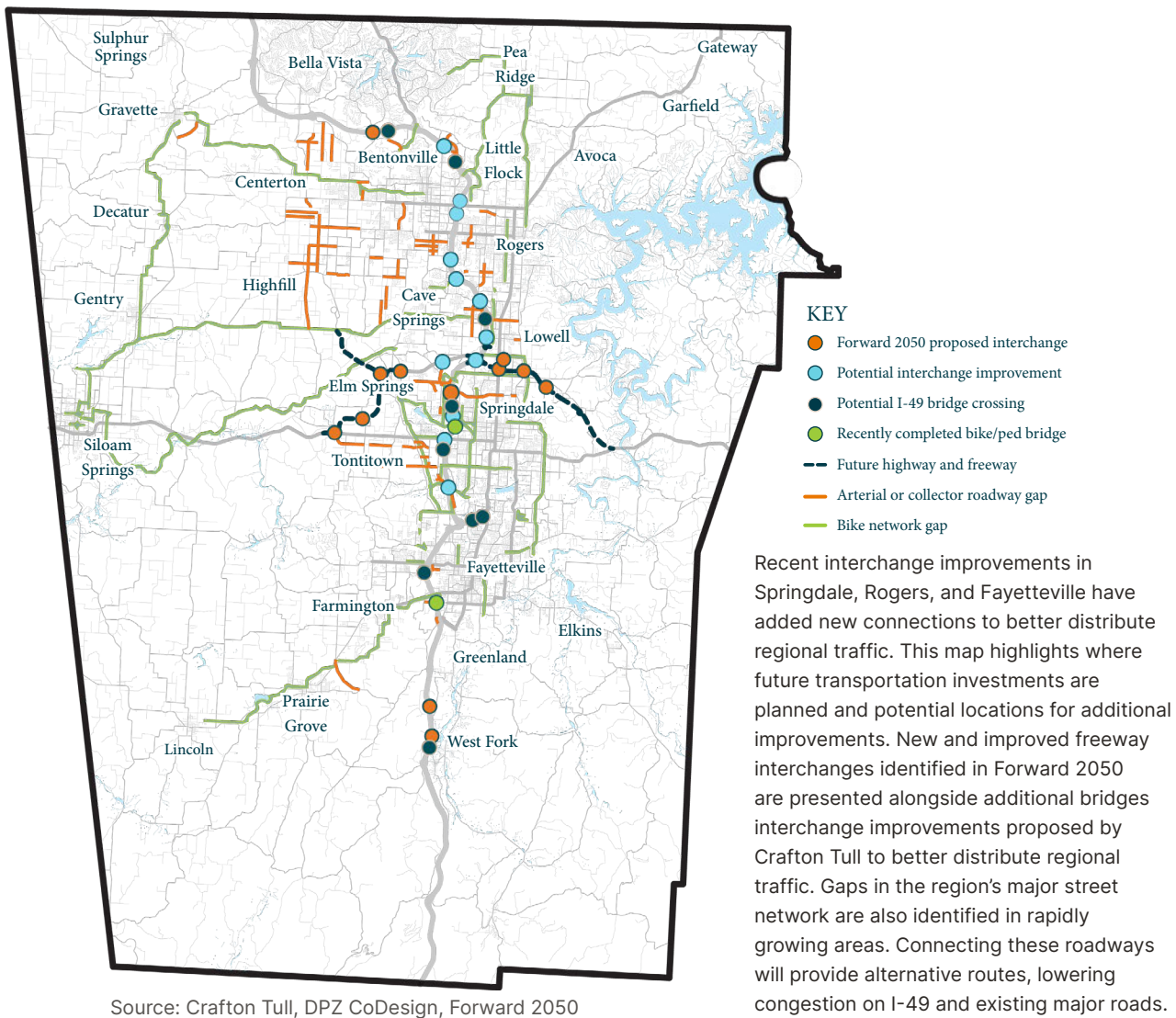
Source: Arkansas Department of Transportation

Expanding the Options

Balancing Northwest Arkansas' transportation network begins with expanding choices, creating more connections and aligning growth with where more options are available. Expanding choice means completing key roadway links, adding interchanges and crossings along I-49, expanding sidewalks and bikeways, and ensuring new development strengthens rather than limits connectivity.

Congestion eases when traffic can spread across multiple routes and when more homes are located near jobs, schools, and daily needs. As the region grows, the network of major corridors, local streets, and active transportation routes must become more connected and complete.

Connecting the Regional Network



Why Travel Options Matter for Northwest Arkansas

Transportation choice is essential to sustaining growth.

Most trips in Northwest Arkansas will continue to be made by car, but improving travel means providing more options, not just wider roads. When homes, jobs, and services are closer together and routes are better connected, trips become shorter and traffic pressure is reduced. Additional connections help spread traffic rather than concentrate it on a few corridors.

If current practices continue, congestion will worsen, leading to costly road widening with limited long-term benefit.

Transit investments including bus rapid transit on U.S. 71B and expanded local service offer alternatives for longer or peak trips, while sidewalks and bike connections support shorter trips and access. Tools like managed lanes or tolling can improve reliability and help fund a more effective transportation system. Together these strategies create a more balanced system that performs better over time and for multiple modes of travel.

Key Outcomes

Provide More Travel Options for More People

Expand choices to drive, ride transit, walk, and bike so people can select the most efficient mode for each trip. Measure progress by average share of transportation mode.

Improve Network Connectivity

Increase the number of local and secondary connections that allows trips to shift across routes and modes, reducing pressure on major corridors. Measure progress by street network density and link-to-node ratio.

Shorten Daily Trips

Reduce average trip length and improve travel time reliability for daily trips, especially during peak hours. Measure progress by average trip length and major roadway congestion.

Increase System Reliability Without Widening

Reduce day-to-day travel time variability for everyday trips by distributing demand across connected streets, transit services, and parallel routes. Measure progress by average commuting time.

Enable Cost-Effective Transit Service

Focus growth and connections where frequent transit can operate efficiently, increasing ridership per mile of service. Measure progress by transit ridership growth.

Shift Investment Toward Fixing and Connecting

Prioritize maintenance, intersection improvements, and missing links over continuous outward road expansion. Measure progress by city and MPO funding allocation.

Growth investments can be transportation solutions. Shops, homes, and services near jobs and parks can reduce driving distances and congestion. When located near transit, they increase ridership, which helps fund operations.



LOWELL CITY HALL

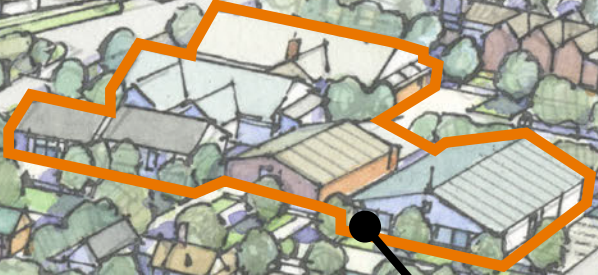
NEW MAIN STREET ALONG AN EXTENSION OF MADISON AVENUE

HOUSING AND JOBS WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE OF BUS RAPID TRANSIT

McClure Avenue



ODDFELLOWS HALL



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

ADDED HOUSING VARIETY



A vibrant downtown in Lowell would help support bus rapid transit on U.S. 71B, and contribute to the city's tax base.



Imagined future investment in blueways and greenways throughout the region.

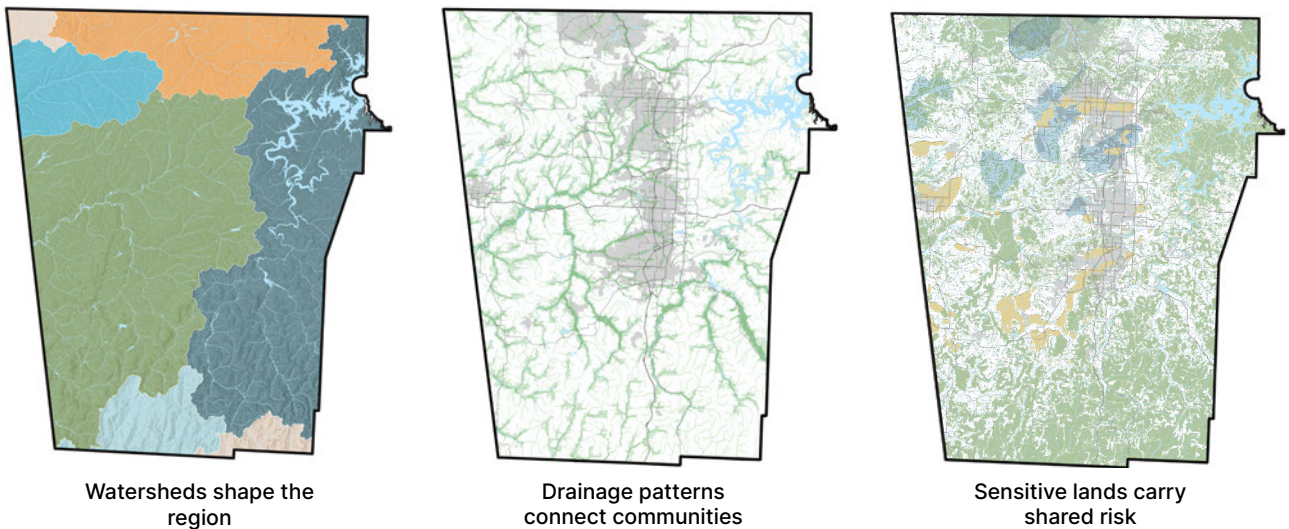
Leverage Water as a Shared Resource

Coordinate water, sewer, and stormwater as regional systems to improve service, lower costs, and create public value.

Across Northwest Arkansas, water systems already operate beyond jurisdictional boundaries. Communities draw from common sources, rely on interconnected treatment systems, and are linked through watersheds that carry stormwater and pollutants across city and county lines. As the region grows these interdependencies and pressure on water systems are becoming more visible.

Several communities are encountering wastewater capacity limits that constrain development or require major facility expansions. When systems that function regionally are planned locally, gaps and inefficiencies emerge. Coordinating water, wastewater, and stormwater investments allows the region to expand where capacity exists, target upgrades strategically, protect shared watersheds, and avoid duplicating costly infrastructure.

Water Systems Cross Boundaries



Source: Arkansas GIS Office, Tax assessors in Benton and Washington counties, U.S. Fish and Wildlife

When Systems Align, Value Multiplies

From isolated projects to shared assets.

Much of Northwest Arkansas is tied together by two critical systems: the Illinois River watershed, which carries stormwater and wastewater across communities and into Oklahoma, and Beaver Lake, which supplies drinking water to much of the region. These shared systems link upstream and downstream communities, making water quality and infrastructure performance a regional responsibility rather than a local one.

As development expands, demands on treatment plants, interceptor lines, and stormwater systems continue to grow. Coordinated planning allows communities to direct growth toward available capacity while expanding treatment capacity where needed, improving discharge systems, and managing stormwater flows as one interconnected system. When these elements are addressed together, communities can reduce streambank erosion, limit pollutant loads, improve the health of streams and rivers, and remove infrastructure constraints that can otherwise slow or limit growth.

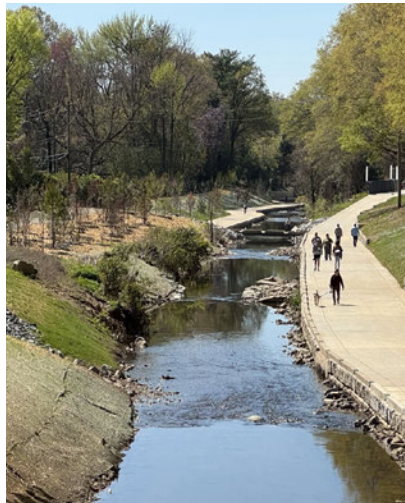
Over time, aligning these systems creates infrastructure that is more resilient, easier to manage, and more cost-effective. It shifts water management from isolated fixes to a coordinated regional system that improves environmental outcomes, supports community growth, strengthens public trust, and advances fiscal and ecological resilience.

Coordinated Water, Transportation, and Preservation Corridors



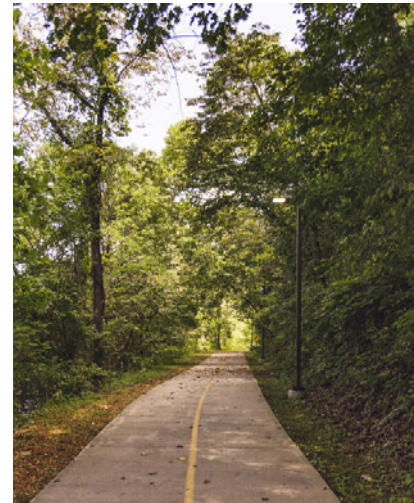
Water management and mobility in the same corridor.

Huntsville, AL



Stormwater infrastructure that also serves daily life.

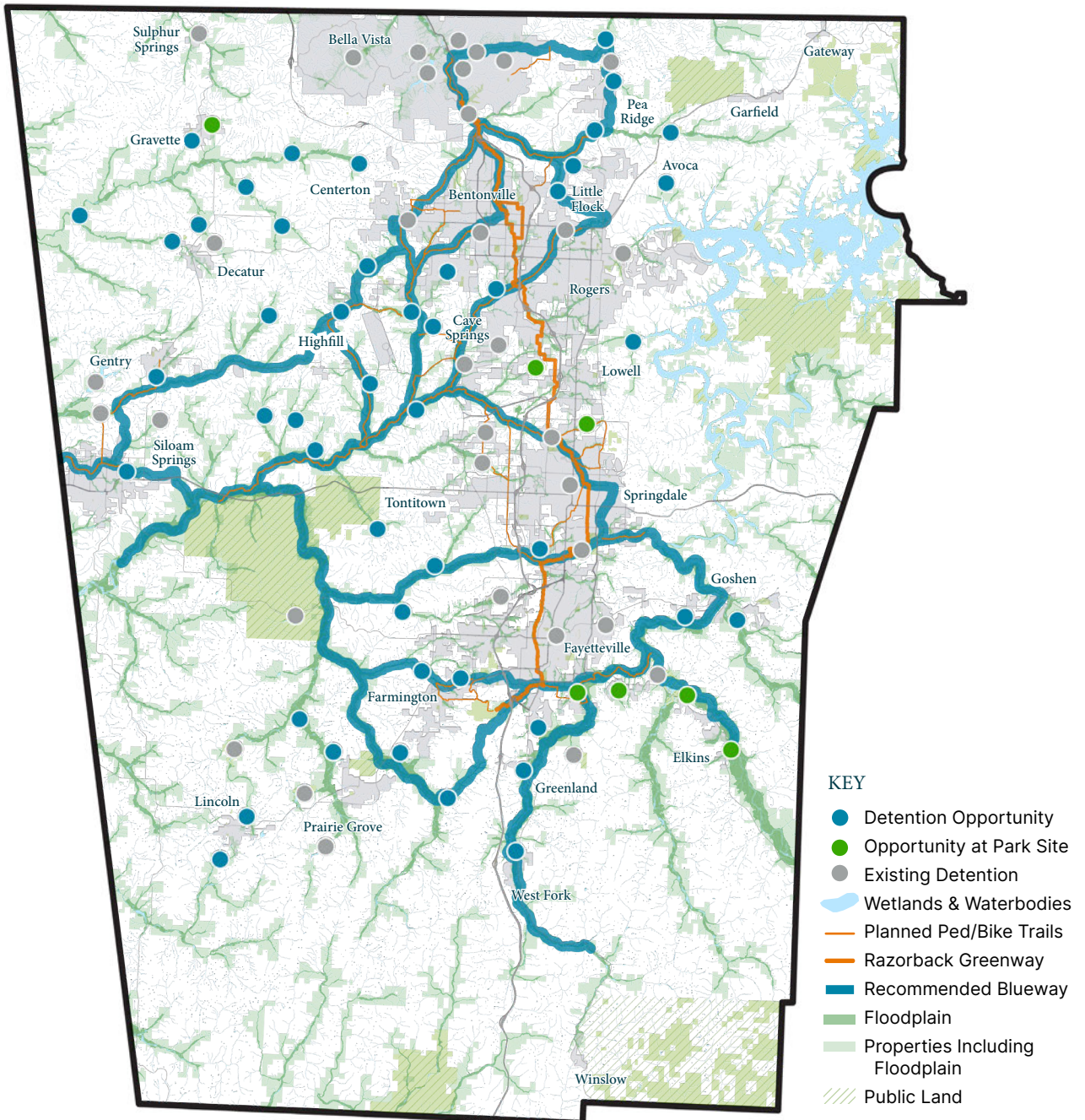
Mecklenburg County, NC



A continuous system built through coordination.

Razorback Greenway

Shared Corridors Carry Multiple Systems



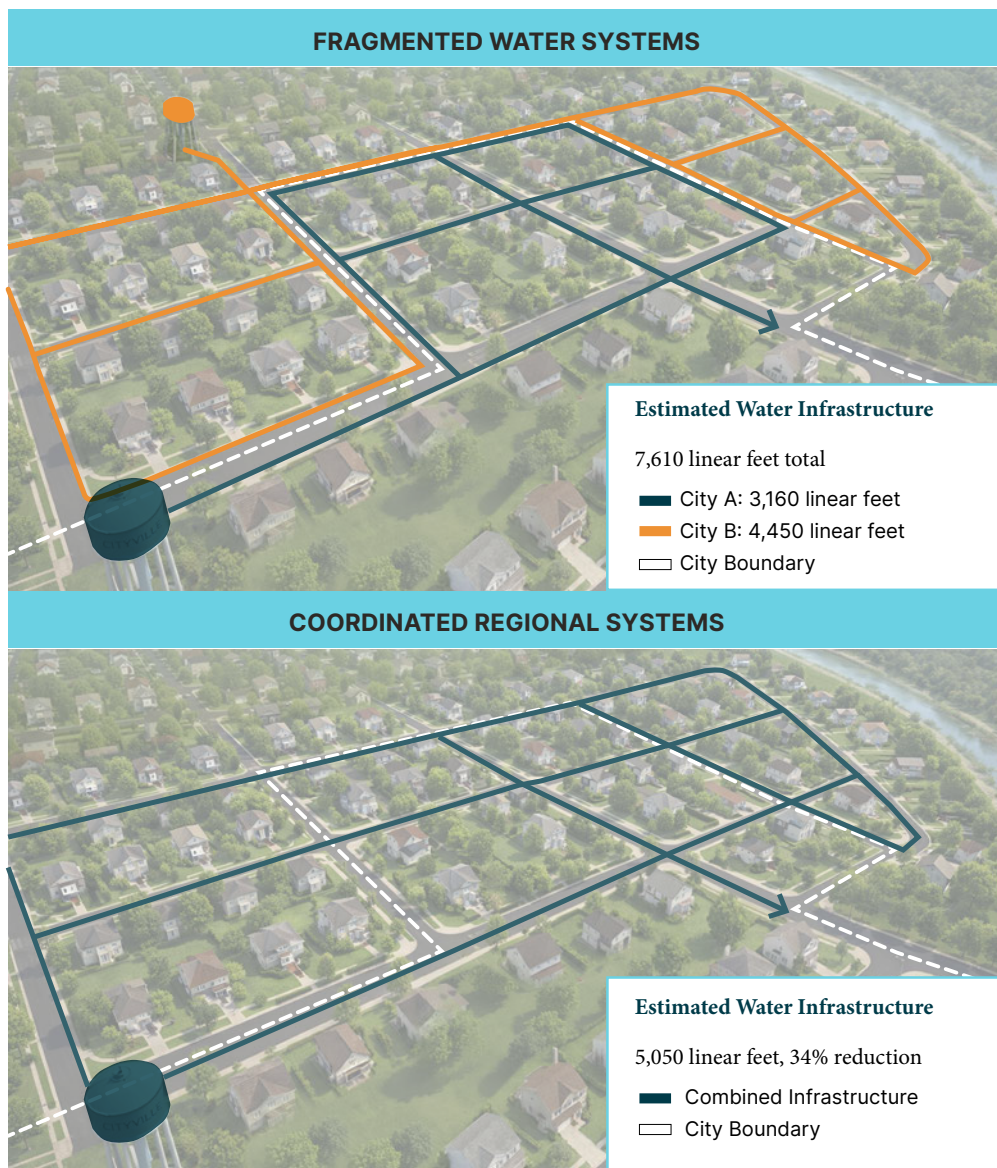
Streams and floodplains already form a connected system across Northwest Arkansas. Analysis by Crafton Tull, informed by NWARPC's Regional Open Space Plan, shows how these corridors could align with trails, parks, and stormwater investments. The Razorback Regional Greenway follows several of these waterways while protecting stream corridors that ultimately drain toward Beaver Lake or the Illinois River watershed. When planned together, these corridors can manage runoff, expand recreation, and strengthen regional mobility at the same time, connecting neighborhoods to a regional network of blueways and greenways, improving water quality and reducing long-term infrastructure costs. Proposed blueways combine stream and floodplain conservation, floodway stabilization, bike and pedestrian trails, and stormwater treatment and detention.

Sources: Crafton Tull, DPZ CoDesign, Arkansas GIS Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Coordinated Systems Perform Better Over Time

When water, wastewater, and stormwater systems are planned together, rather than as isolated, jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction projects, performance improves over time. Coordinated systems align capacity with growth and allow investments to be timed and scaled more deliberately. They also reduce costly duplication, especially at city boundaries where separate systems can overlap or leave nearby capacity unused. This drives up both capital and maintenance costs.

Planning as a connected regional system allows communities to share capacity, target upgrades efficiently, and avoid redundant investments, resulting in infrastructure that supports growth more reliably and cost-effectively.



This theoretical example demonstrates how water infrastructure is less efficient when systems don't cross city boundaries, increasing capital and maintenance costs.

Why Coordinated Systems Matter for Northwest Arkansas

Water systems will either limit growth or enhance its success.

Northwest Arkansas is expanding faster than the infrastructure that supports it. New development and roads increase demand on water supply, wastewater treatment, and stormwater systems that already cross city lines. When planning happens separately, capacity limits appear unevenly, costs rise without warning, investments don't address systemic needs, and impacts move downstream instead of being addressed where they begin.

A coordinated regional approach changes that trajectory. It allows communities to plan growth where capacity exists, expand systems strategically, and protect shared rivers and streams. **Without coordination, water infrastructure becomes a recurring constraint on growth.** With it, these systems form a stable foundation that supports development, safeguards natural resources, and reduces long-term public cost.

Key Outcomes

Capacity Aligned With Growth

Reduce areas where development is delayed or constrained by water or wastewater capacity limits. Measure outcomes by permit delays and moratoriums.

Reduced Unexpected Costs

Reduce unplanned capital spending and emergency contract work triggered by late-identified capacity needs. Measure progress through city capital improvement budgets.

Utility Rate Stabilization

Reduce rate volatility by sequencing expansions strategically instead of repeating stopgap fixes. Measure progress by utility rate increase over time.

Protected Downstream Conditions

Reduce downstream flooding and water-quality impacts by addressing runoff and pollutants where they originate. Measure progress by new acre-foot of total stormwater treatment and detention.

Productive Land Use

Reduce land consumed by scattered, parcel-by-parcel stormwater storage through shared corridor solutions. Measure progress by new acre-foot of regional stormwater treatment and detention.

Multi-Benefit Corridors

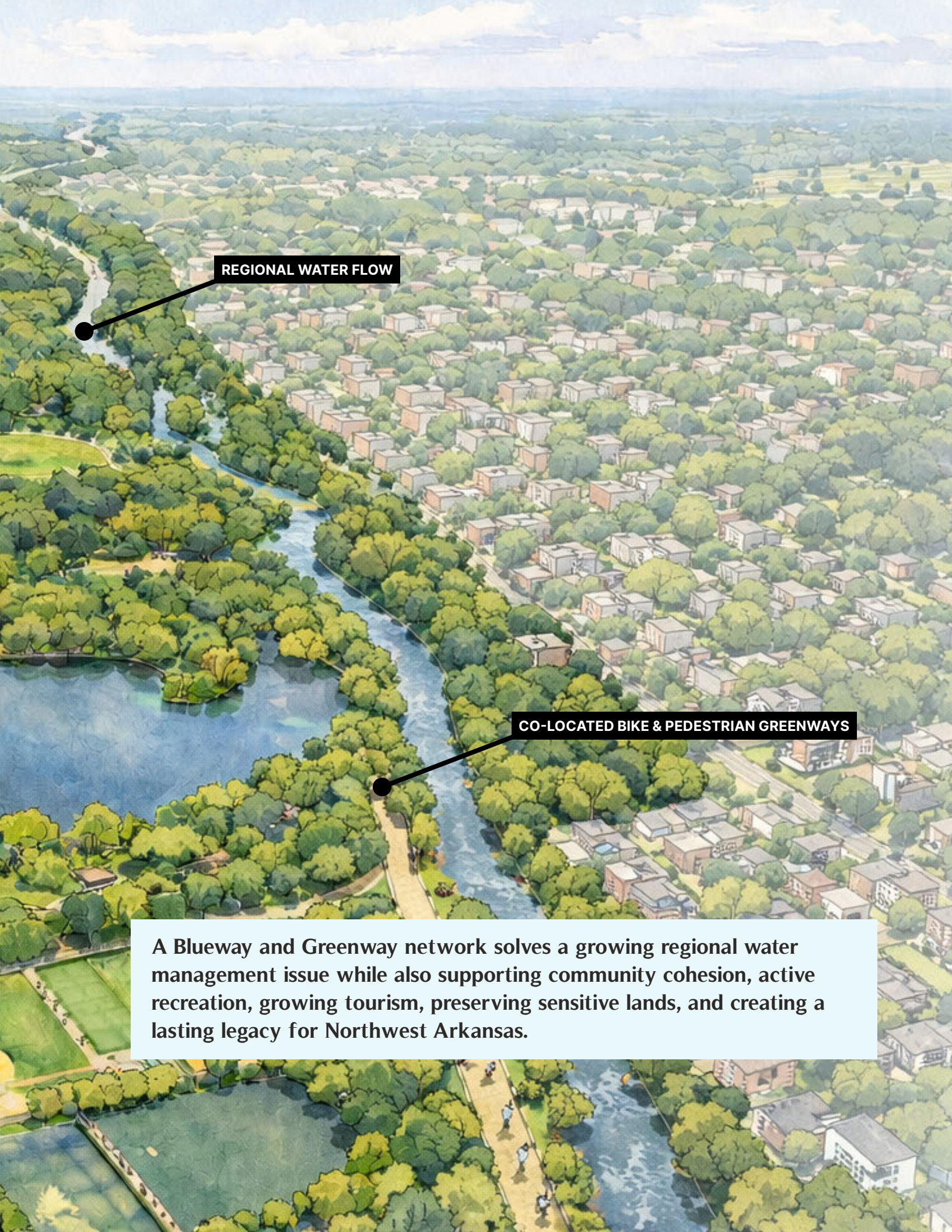
Increase miles of coordinated blueway/greenway corridors that combine water management with access and open space. Measure progress by new acres of blueway and linear miles of greenway.

ACTIVE RECREATION

PASSIVE RECREATION

REGIONAL WATER DETENTION & TREATMENT

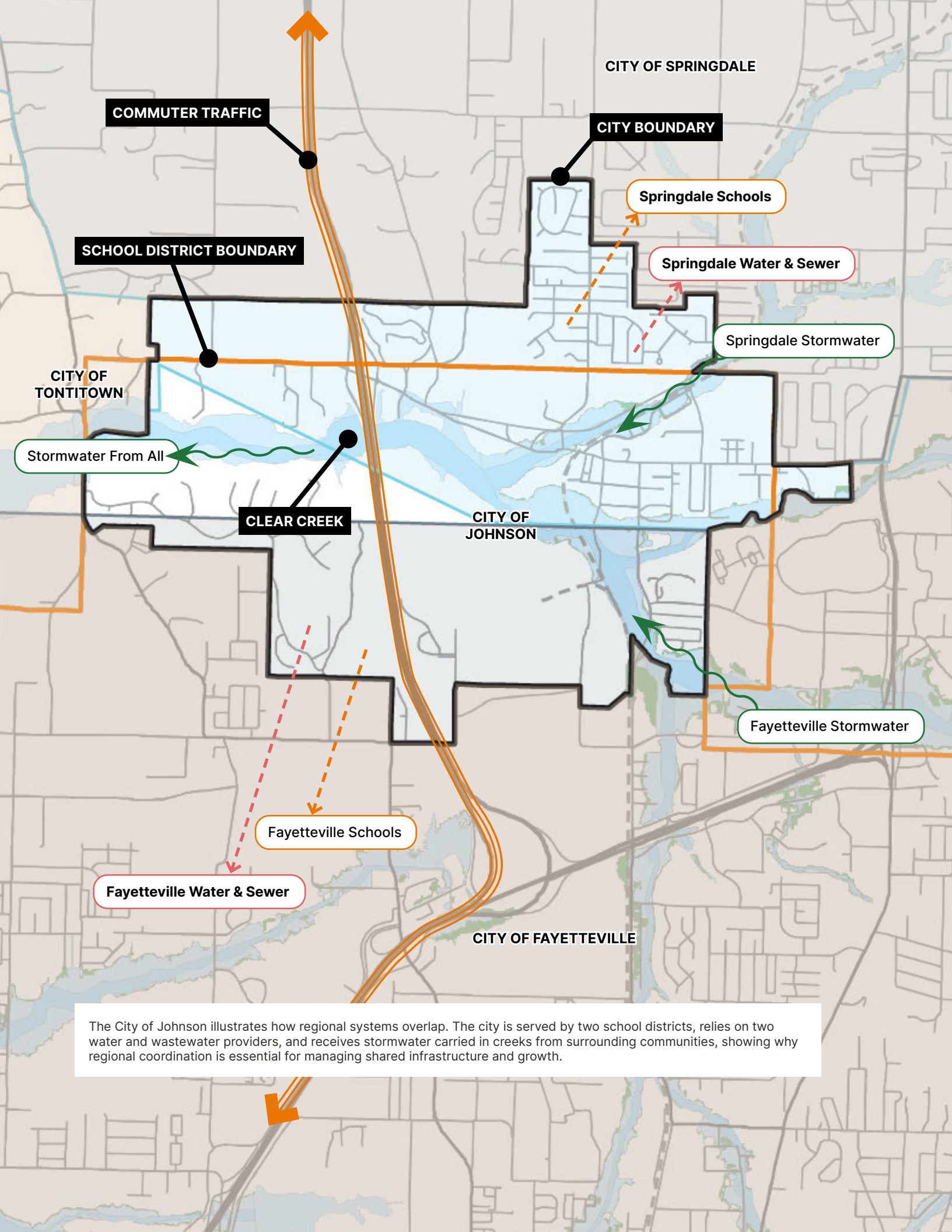




REGIONAL WATER FLOW

CO-LOCATED BIKE & PEDESTRIAN GREENWAYS

A Blueway and Greenway network solves a growing regional water management issue while also supporting community cohesion, active recreation, growing tourism, preserving sensitive lands, and creating a lasting legacy for Northwest Arkansas.



The City of Johnson illustrates how regional systems overlap. The city is served by two school districts, relies on two water and wastewater providers, and receives stormwater carried in creeks from surrounding communities, showing why regional coordination is essential for managing shared infrastructure and growth.

Lead Together With Regional Governance

Growth crosses boundaries, even when leadership does not.

Northwest Arkansas no longer grows one city at a time. Jobs, housing markets, infrastructure systems, and environmental impacts now function at a regional scale, regardless of how decisions are organized. Water flows downstream. Commutes cross jurisdictions. Utility capacity, transportation investment, and land-use choices made in one community increasingly shape outcomes somewhere else.

While the region collaborates in many ways today, its formal decision-making structures have not fully caught up to this reality. Many of the most consequential choices about growth, infrastructure, and public investment are made system by system and place by place, lacking coordination. Even well-coordinated projects can work against one another when priorities, data, timing, and funding are not aligned across systems.

At this scale, leadership is not just about individual projects or policies. It is about building and sustaining the civic capacity to plan, invest, and act together. Regions that succeed treat governance as essential infrastructure, investing in shared institutions, formal agreements, and cross-jurisdiction coordination that allow growth to be guided with intent rather than managed reactively.

When growth outpaces coordination, no single city can address the consequences alone. Shared systems require shared leadership, durable agreements, and regional institutions that can align decisions across boundaries and across time.

When Governance is Fragmented, Systems Underperform

Independent decisions have regional consequences.

Northwest Arkansas already depends on infrastructure that operates across city boundaries. Drinking water is supplied regionally through Beaver Water District and the Benton-Washington Regional Public Water Authority. The Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission (NWARPC) serves as both a Council of Governments and the region’s Metropolitan Planning Organization, coordinating transportation planning and supporting regional collaboration. Solid waste is managed through multi-county districts, and ongoing efforts are examining wastewater capacity and treatment needs that span multiple communities.

Despite these shared systems, many related decisions continue to be made locally. Stormwater programs, wastewater expansion, utility extensions, and street connections are often planned and funded city by city. When growth in one community affects downstream capacity, watershed conditions, or transportation demand in another, misalignment can lead to delayed projects, duplicated infrastructure, and higher long-term costs.

As the region grows, its physical systems will become more interconnected whether governance does or not. Aligning planning, policies, data, and infrastructure investment across jurisdictions is essential to reduce inefficiencies, manage costs, and ensure reliable service at a regional scale.

Fee Misalignment Influences Growth

	Fire	Police	Parks	Library	Sewer	Water	Storm	Streets
Bella Vista	◆	◆		◆				
Bentonville	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆		
Cave Springs					◆	◆		
Centerton	◆	◆	◆					◆
Decatur								
Elkins	◆	◆			◆	◆		
Elm Springs					◆	◆		
Farmington								
Fayetteville	◆	◆			◆	◆		
Garfield								
Gateway								
Gentry					◆	◆		

This abbreviated list of impact fees charged by cities demonstrates inconsistency throughout the region. Development impact fees are intended to ensure that new development contributes to the cost of infrastructure and public services. Some cities apply impact fees across multiple categories, while others have few or none. Inconsistency can influence where development occurs, drawing projects to lower-fee jurisdictions even when other locations would be more efficient. Over time, this can lead to uneven growth patterns and higher costs for households, public services, infrastructure, and roads.

Source: Crafton Tull

Why Shared Governance Matters for Northwest Arkansas

Civic capacity is the advantage that makes every other vision topic achievable.

When civic capacity is strong, the region stops reacting issue by issue and starts acting with intention. Decisions are guided by shared priorities, consistent data, and a longer view of growth. Infrastructure investments align with where development is occurring and where capacity exists. Housing, transportation, utilities, and environmental systems reinforce one another instead of competing for funding, attention, or political bandwidth.

Northwest Arkansas already collaborates across jurisdictions, but existing institutions are constrained by scale and resources. Without adequate funding, the Northwest Arkansas

Regional Planning Commission cannot fully function as a council of governments. The Regional Mobility Authority and Ozark Regional Transit cannot provide the services cities desire and residents need. The Northwest Arkansas Conservation Authority cannot expand capacity at the pace growth demands. **Without stronger coordination and investment, fragmented decision-making will drive rising costs and produce solutions that solve one problem while creating another.** With coordination and investment, Northwest Arkansas gains the ability to anticipate growth, reduce risk, and deliver infrastructure that holds up over time.

Key Outcomes

Aligned Public Investment

Public capital consistently advances shared regional priorities rather than competing or duplicative local projects.

Coordinated Policy, Planning and Shared Intelligence

Shared policy and planning frameworks, data, forecasting, and analysis to reduce duplication and improve the timing and effectiveness of regional decisions.

Clear Progress Tracking

Regional goals are tracked through shared metrics, benchmarks, and regular reporting that inform budget decisions, project selection, and course corrections over time.

Stronger Multi-Sector Collaboration

Cities, schools, nonprofits, employers, and civic institutions coordinate plans and investments around shared growth priorities, increasing effectiveness and reducing fragmentation.

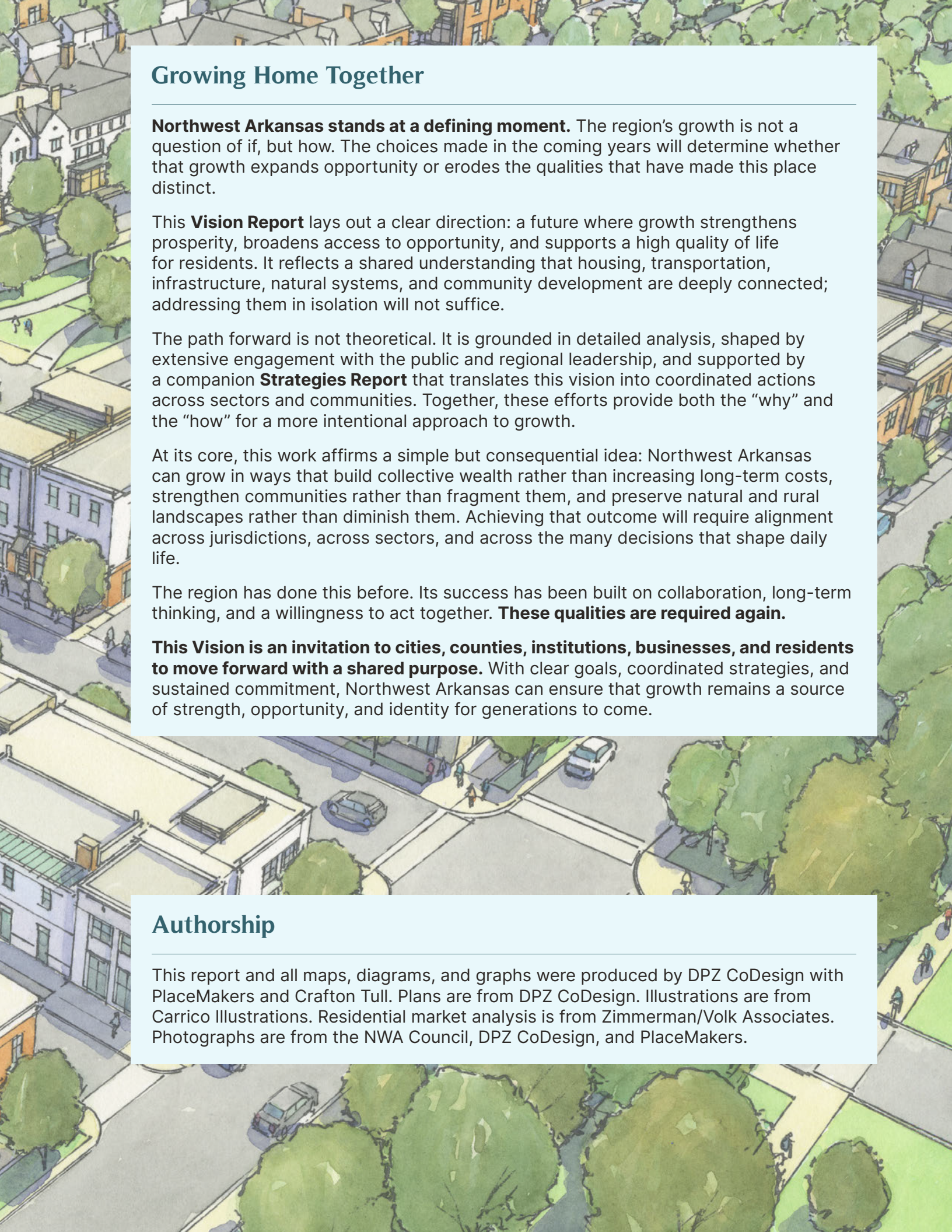
Improved Grant Competitiveness

Regional coordination strengthens applications for state and federal funding, increasing awards and reducing fragmented submissions.

Measure progress together through a strengthened Council of Governments.



Growth potential at U.S. 62 and S Mock Street in Prairie Grove.



Growing Home Together

Northwest Arkansas stands at a defining moment. The region's growth is not a question of if, but how. The choices made in the coming years will determine whether that growth expands opportunity or erodes the qualities that have made this place distinct.

This **Vision Report** lays out a clear direction: a future where growth strengthens prosperity, broadens access to opportunity, and supports a high quality of life for residents. It reflects a shared understanding that housing, transportation, infrastructure, natural systems, and community development are deeply connected; addressing them in isolation will not suffice.

The path forward is not theoretical. It is grounded in detailed analysis, shaped by extensive engagement with the public and regional leadership, and supported by a companion **Strategies Report** that translates this vision into coordinated actions across sectors and communities. Together, these efforts provide both the “why” and the “how” for a more intentional approach to growth.

At its core, this work affirms a simple but consequential idea: Northwest Arkansas can grow in ways that build collective wealth rather than increasing long-term costs, strengthen communities rather than fragment them, and preserve natural and rural landscapes rather than diminish them. Achieving that outcome will require alignment across jurisdictions, across sectors, and across the many decisions that shape daily life.

The region has done this before. Its success has been built on collaboration, long-term thinking, and a willingness to act together. **These qualities are required again.**

This Vision is an invitation to cities, counties, institutions, businesses, and residents to move forward with a shared purpose. With clear goals, coordinated strategies, and sustained commitment, Northwest Arkansas can ensure that growth remains a source of strength, opportunity, and identity for generations to come.

Authorship

This report and all maps, diagrams, and graphs were produced by DPZ CoDesign with PlaceMakers and Crafton Tull. Plans are from DPZ CoDesign. Illustrations are from Carrico Illustrations. Residential market analysis is from Zimmerman/Volk Associates. Photographs are from the NWA Council, DPZ CoDesign, and PlaceMakers.

