
04



CHAPTER 4

LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT

The Land Use and Development chapter establishes the definitions and guidance for land use and promotes strategies to make Helena more sustainable and resilient, preserve its character, enhance its quality of life, accommodate growth, and advance its economy. This chapter is specific enough to guide land-use decisions while also allowing the City to be flexible and creative in individual approaches to new development.

LAND USE INFLUENCES

Beyond demographic and socioeconomic factors, future growth and development can be influenced or limited by various factors such as floodplains, migratory wildlife corridors, infrastructure service areas, and identified priority infill and redevelopment sites. The following sections present complementary analyses that evaluate existing development patterns, residents' access to amenities, and fiscal returns. These analyses were used to inform and reinforce the future land use definitions and recommendations in the following chapters.

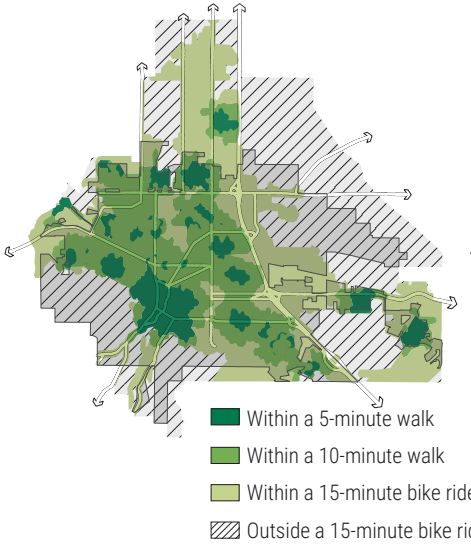
Complete Neighborhood Index

The infrastructure needed for quality development extends beyond pipes in the ground and pavement. While quality water, sewer, roads are essential for housing, achieving the quality of place increasingly valued by residents requires housing to be located within a broader network of community amenities. The Complete Neighborhood Index (CNI) evaluates residents' access to essential quality-of-life amenities throughout the planning area including:

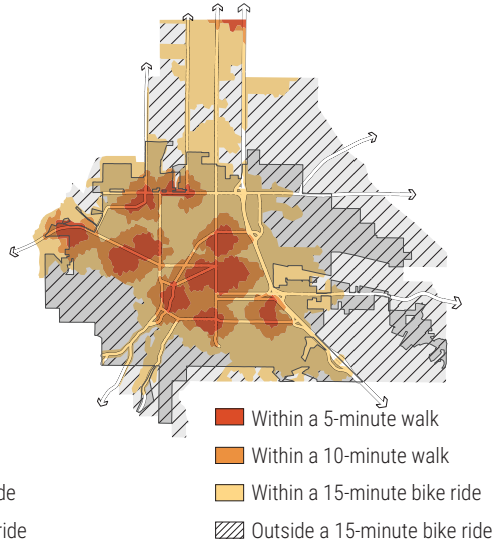
- **Grocery Stores.** Ensure access to fresh and nutritious food options.
- **Parks.** Provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and connection to nature.
- **Schools.** Ensure access to education and childcare services.
- **Medical Facilities.** Ensure access to facilities for health and wellness.
- **Emergency Services.** Ensure access to local fire and EMS services.

The resulting CNI map (shown on page 25) illustrates amenity-rich locations in darker colors compared to lighter-colored areas that are served by fewer amenities or are located farther from them.

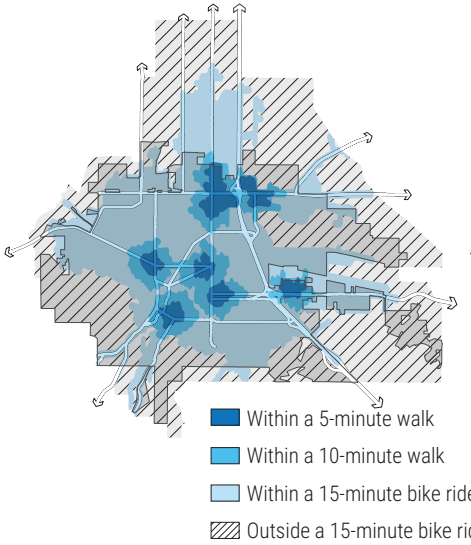
Proximity to Parks



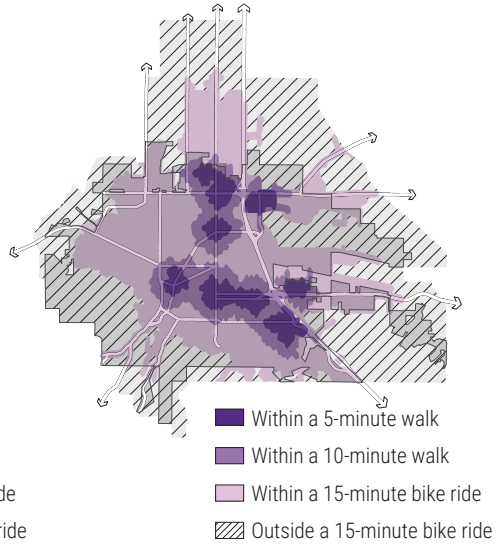
Proximity to Schools



Proximity to Grocery Stores



Proximity to Medical Facilities

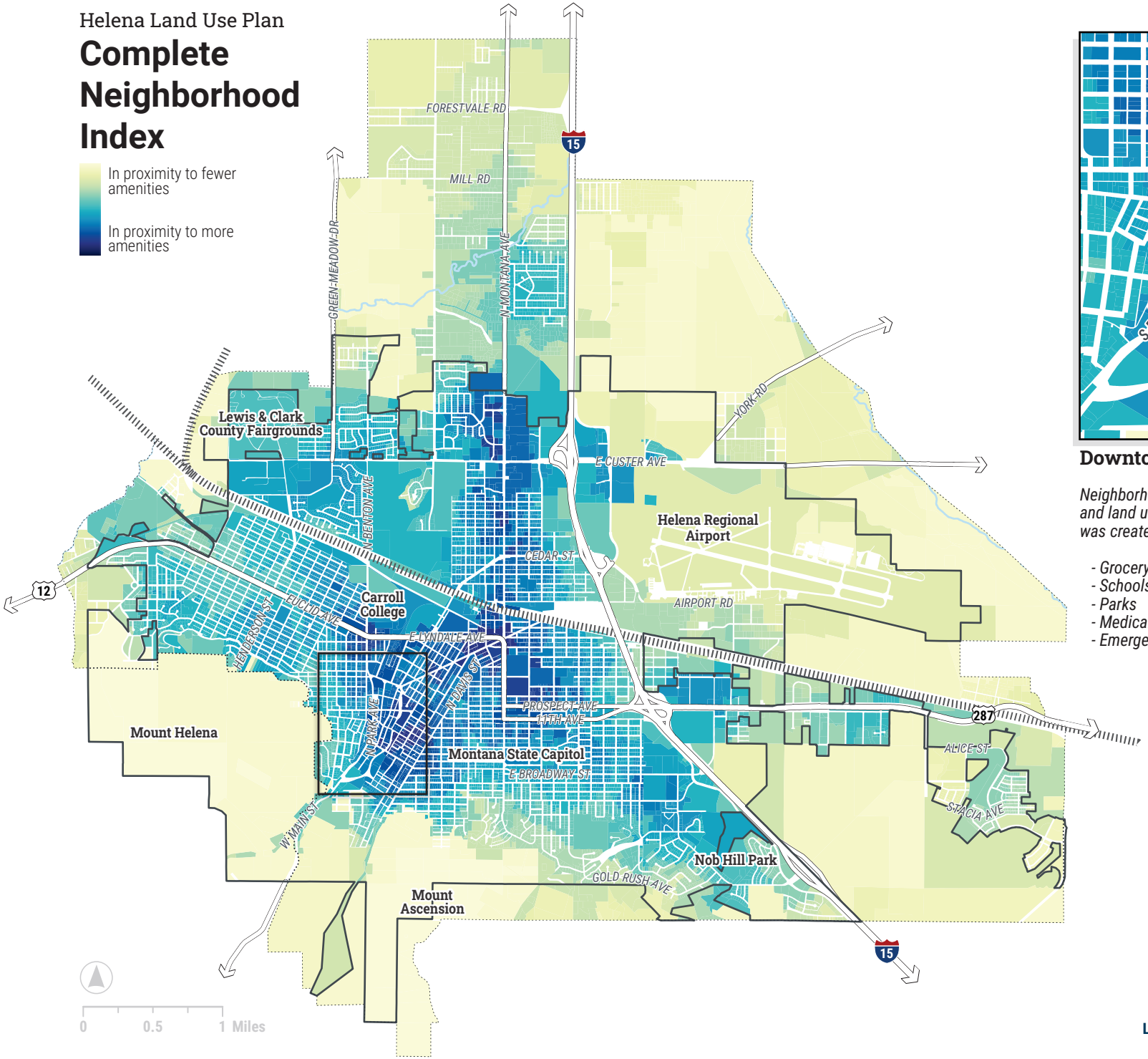


Helena Land Use Plan

Complete Neighborhood Index

In proximity to fewer amenities

In proximity to more amenities





Downtown Helena

Neighborhoods with a mix of amenities and land uses are complete. The index was created based on proximity to:

- *Grocery Stores*
- *Schools*
- *Parks*
- *Medical Facilities*
- *Emergency Medical Services*

East Helena

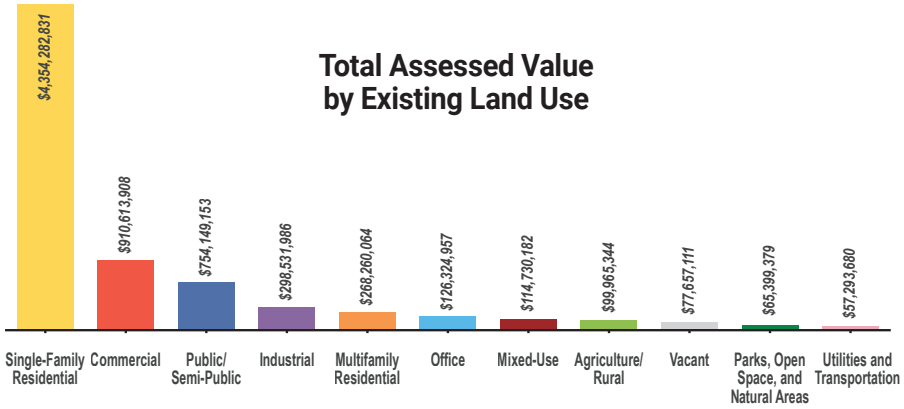
Assessed Value Per Acre Analysis

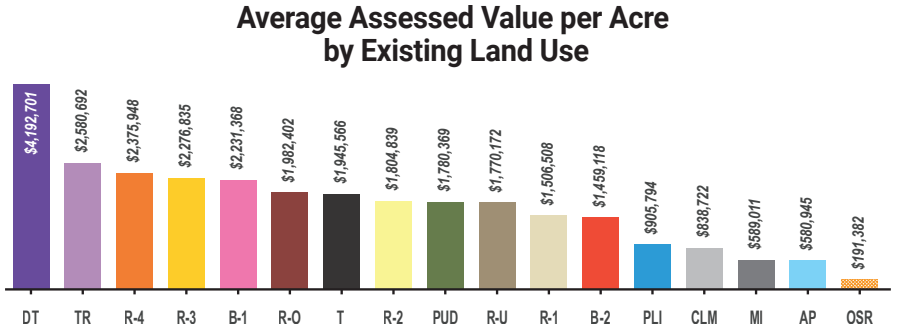
In addition to understanding the costs associated with development, the tax revenue generated by development should also be a consideration in ensuring that land use policy supports fiscally responsible growth. The Assessed Value Per Acre analysis examines the fiscal productivity or tax generating revenue of different land uses and development patterns across Helena. Across the city, single-family residential accounts for 19.1% of the planning area acreage and generates the largest share of total land value at 4.35 billion. However, mixed-use development generates the highest value per acre at $7.26 million (3.9 times the per-acre value of single-family residential).

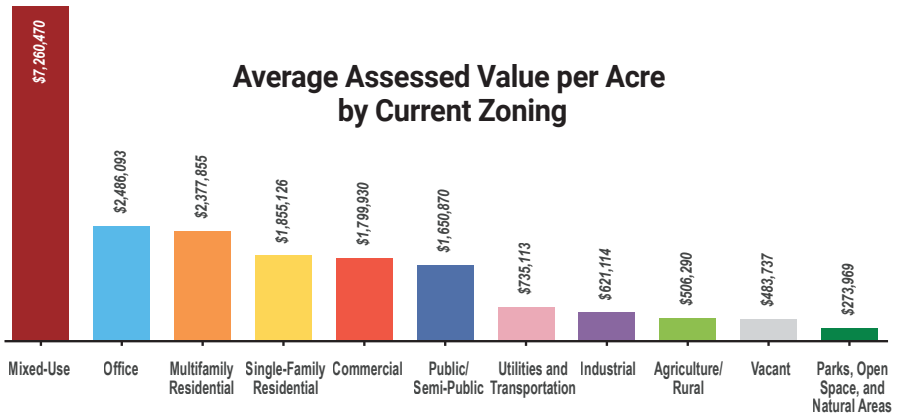
This analysis calculated assessed value per acre for each property by dividing the combined land and building value by the property's acreage. These values were averaged based on existing land use and current zoning patterns throughout the planning area.

Key Takeaways

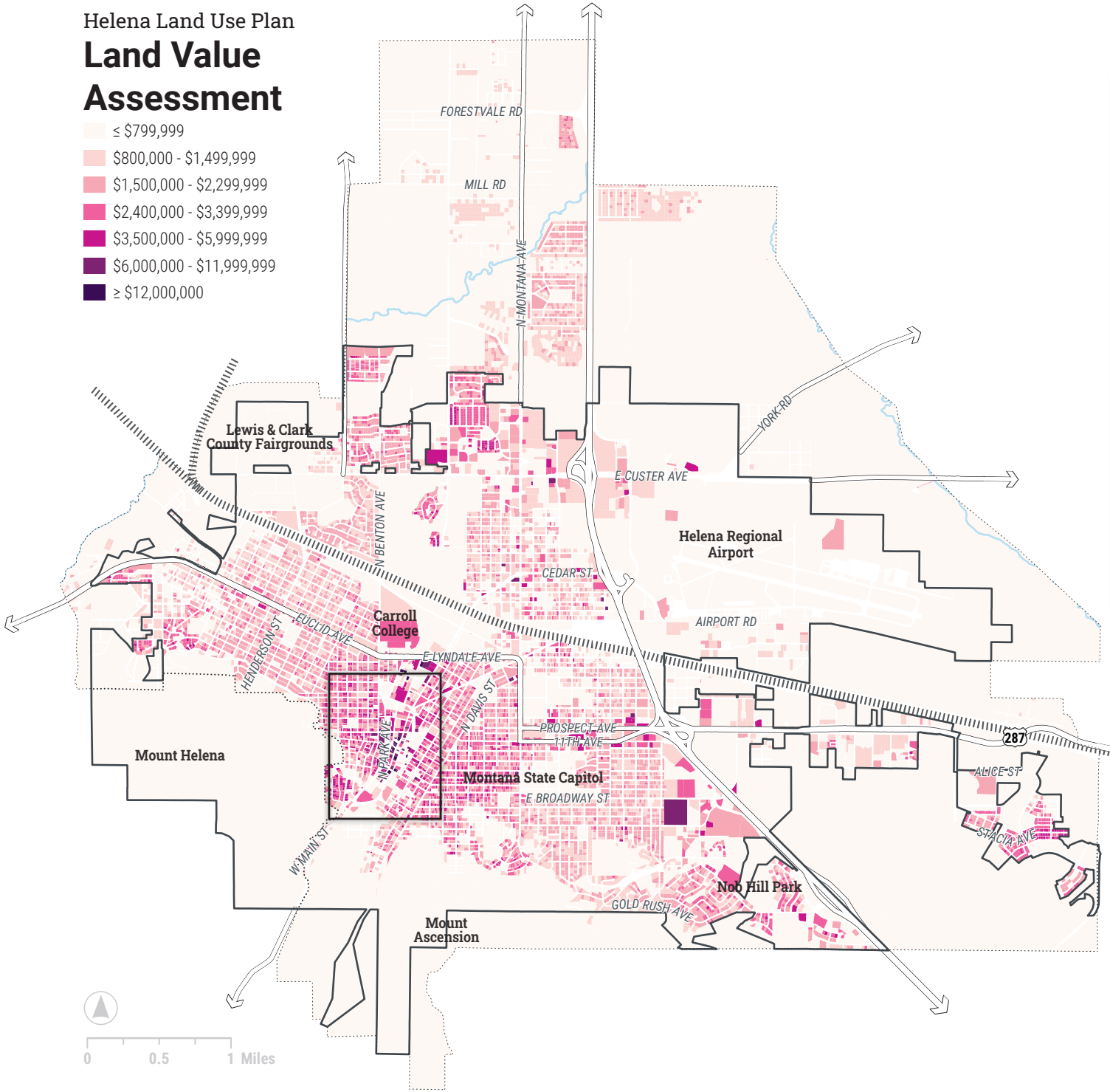
- Partial service gaps were located in residential areas around Euclid Avenue and Broadway Street, indicating a "middle ground" of amenity access.
- Land north of Custer Avenue, east of Interstate 15, and newer subdivisions ranked low on the CNI. These areas generally rely heavily on cars to access basic services.
- Significant barriers to active transportation accessibility exist at the intersection of Montana Avenue, Lyndale Avenue, and Prospect Avenue, despite the surrounding area's relatively high amenity scores.
- Downtown generates the highest value per acre in the City while contributing to substantial public and semi-public facilities. These uses provide essential amenities that attract residents and visitors to Downtown, supporting the businesses and property values around them.
- Older, established areas surrounding Downtown exhibit higher assessed values compared to other neighborhoods in the City.







Land Value Assessment



Value of Traditional Neighborhood Development

In Helena, traditional gridded neighborhoods surrounding Downtown—with their compact block structure, higher density of housing, and mix of uses—are the most consistently high-valued areas across the planning area. These analyses demonstrate the significant potential that traditional neighborhood development patterns possess. Urban neighborhoods with compact development (South Central, Upper East Side, Upper West Side) exhibit a range of average assessed values of between $2,696,000 and $2,900,000. Suburban neighborhoods (South Hills, Green Meadow Drive subdivisions) show a range of average assessed values between $1,800,000 and $2,100,000.

Data Source: Montana Department of Revenue, provided by the City of Helena. (Baseline data accessed in 2024)





Strategic Opportunity Framework

The relationship between CNI scores and assessed values reveals strategic opportunities for public investment to leverage growth potential. Four distinct scenarios emerge from the data, each requiring different policy approaches to maximize public benefit while supporting responsible growth.

- **High CNI + High Assessed Value.** These established, well-served neighborhoods represent Helena's most fiscally productive areas where amenities are already capitalized into property values. Future efforts in these areas should focus on managing growth pressure, maintaining neighborhood quality, and preserving existing character of the neighborhood.
- **Low CNI + High Assessed Value.** These areas are served by a limited number of amenities and are comprised of established neighborhoods as well as areas of new construction within the planning area. These locations achieve high values despite limited amenities due to views, character, or exclusivity.
- **High CNI + Low Assessed Value.** These areas, well-served by amenities but with lower assessed values, represent established neighborhoods where new development would capitalize on existing amenity access without requiring additional public investment in services. Vacant properties in this category should be prioritized for targeted redevelopment opportunities. Strategic zoning changes or infrastructure investments in the R-2, R-3, B-1, B-2, and CLM districts could generate substantial property value increases.
- **Low CNI + Low Assessed Value.** These underserved neighborhoods (south of Euclid Avenue, south of Broadway Street east of State Capitol Campus) require investment-first strategies where public funds create value through new amenities and infrastructure.

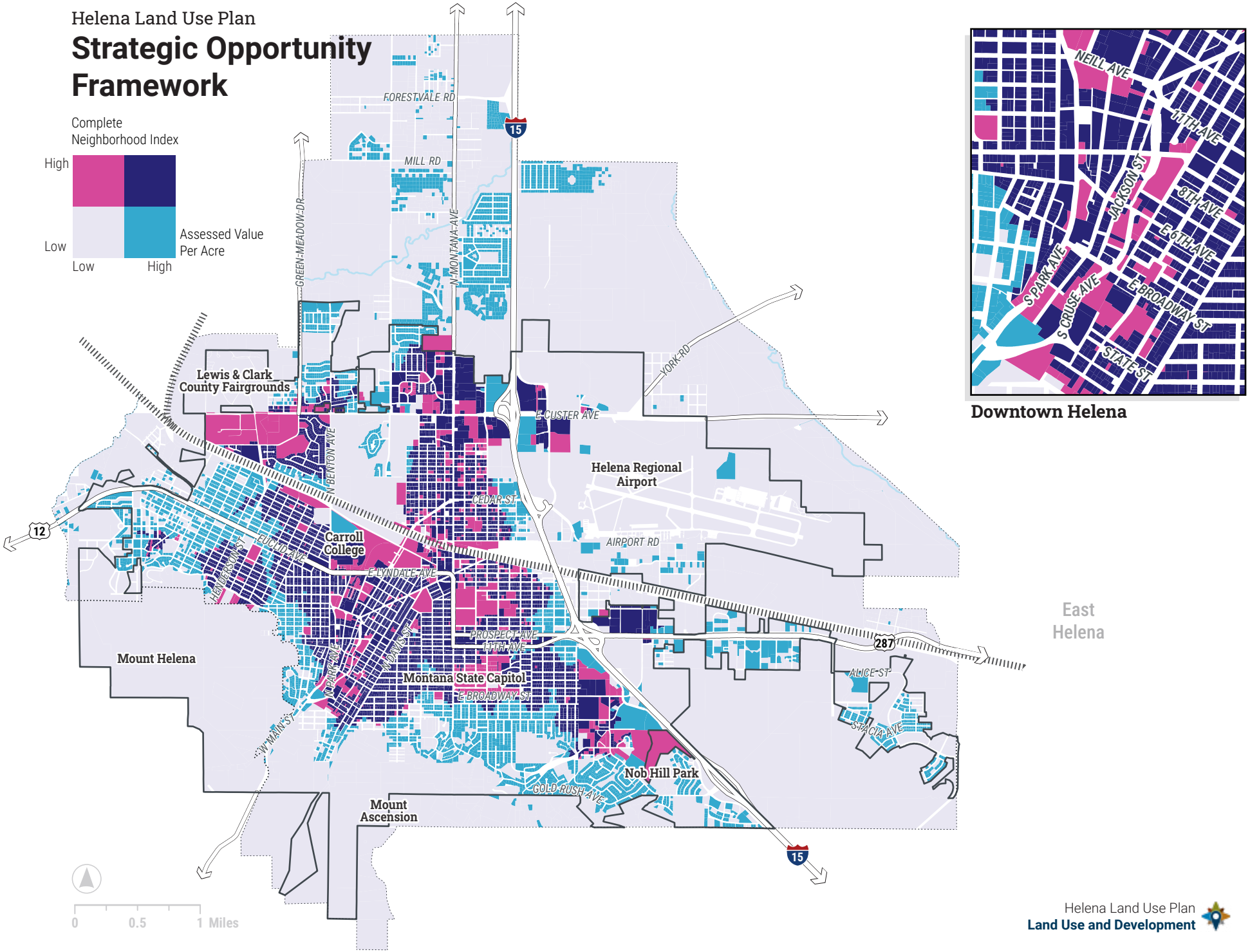
Additional Considerations

The resulting considerations were developed based on the previous analyses. They outline potential strategies to incorporate in future planning and development.

1. Several areas present immediate opportunities for strategic infill and redevelopment that could enhance both neighborhood completeness and fiscal productivity while leveraging existing infrastructure. Allowing higher residential densities, promoting mixed-use development, and integrating residential uses into commercial corridors will support local businesses and walkable neighborhood centers. Vacant parcels should be prioritized for infill development in high CNI areas to capitalize on existing amenity access and address underserved areas.
2. Recent suburban development patterns and future growth areas present challenges for maintaining neighborhood completeness. Ensuring new growth incorporates amenities, improves pedestrian and bicycle connectivity, and contributes to complete neighborhoods rather than isolated subdivisions is critical for long-term community quality and fiscal sustainability.
3. Strategic zoning modifications can better align development patterns with the goal of creating fiscally productive, amenity-rich neighborhoods.
4. Future land uses in areas around Last Chance Gulch and the Railroad District remain appropriate for light industrial, but should include buffers between residential and industrial uses.
5. Medical and healthcare districts could include complementary retail, hospitality, and public gathering spaces as part of future development serving employees, patients, and residents.
6. To ensure long-term fiscal sustainability, the City should consider prioritizing higher-density growth over low-density development, which generates less revenue per acre while requiring similar infrastructure investments.
7. The CNI analysis reinforces the Railroad District Neighborhood Plan goals for improved access, enhanced housing, and local business support. The Montana Avenue/Lyndale Avenue intersection represents an opportunity for targeted mixed-use redevelopment that enhances an already well-serviced area while addressing transportation barriers.

Helena Land Use Plan

Strategic Opportunity Framework



Downtown Helena





LAND USE FRAMEWORK

The Land Use Framework builds upon existing uses and patterns of development within the community to establish a sustainable, compatible, and desirable mix of uses to meet the needs of current and future residents and stakeholders. This framework provides a high-level guide for the type and location of future land uses within the community, enhancing the character and quality of life in each of the City's neighborhoods and employment districts while conserving natural resources. Beyond demographic and socioeconomic factors, future growth and development can be influenced or limited by various physical factors such as floodplains, conservation areas, infrastructure service areas, and priority infill and redevelopment sites.

Rural

Rural land uses encompass areas dedicated to crop production, livestock raising, and other agriculture-related activities, along with farmsteads and low-density residential homes. These areas are distinctly separate from urbanized zones and are typically situated at the periphery of the city's water, sewer, and stormwater infrastructure. Located along the outer edges of the city's planning area, rural land uses should prioritize large-lot, low-density development that preserves the character of the countryside. Additionally, rural land uses should support and sustain agricultural operations, ensuring these areas remain functional and aligned with the City's broader planning goals.

Suburban Residential

Suburban residential land uses are characterized by low-density residential areas typically situated beyond the city's core. These areas act as a transitional zone between more densely developed urban neighborhoods and rural land. Suburban residential areas should primarily accommodate single-family detached homes, providing a balance between accessibility to urban amenities and the spacious, less dense character of rural living. Suburban Residential may also include context-sensitive single-family attached homes and limited small-scale commercial as appropriate.

Urban Residential

Urban residential areas are located near Helena's core and are designed to support moderate- to high-density residential development while accommodating a range of complementary business types. These areas should offer a diverse mix of housing options in addition to single-family detached homes, townhomes, duplexes, and triplexes, and multifamily developments of more than four units to promote greater density and housing variety in a walkable environment. Additionally, compatible commercial uses such as small-scale retail, cafes, professional offices, and personal services should be incorporated to encourage mixed-use neighborhoods.





Mixed Use

Mixed use areas are characterized by developments that integrate multiple, distinct uses either vertically within a single building or horizontally across a unified space. These areas often feature active uses like retail and restaurants on the ground floor, with residential and/or service-oriented uses situated above. Unlike the mixed use development envisioned for Downtown, future mixed use areas should focus less on vertical integration and more on allowing a blend of uses that complement one another. These districts should concentrate diverse residential, office, and commercial activities within a cohesive environment.

Downtown

The Downtown area consists largely of high-density office, retail, housing, entertainment, institutional, and governmental uses. New development Downtown should seek to provide a mix of these uses, promoting a strong pedestrian-friendly environment and activating the historic core of the city. The Downtown land use should emphasize and maintain Helena's community character including preservation of existing historic structures or architectural elements and contribute to Helena's cultural resources and sense of place.

Commercial

Commercial land uses include a range of retail and services such as grocery stores, gas stations, restaurants, and pharmacies. Essential commercial services should be located adjacent to existing and future residential areas, ensuring that the scale and intensity of commercial development complements nearby neighborhoods. More large scale commercial development should be prioritized along high-traffic corridors such as East Custer Avenue and Interstate 15 to maximize visibility and accessibility. In coordination with property owners and transportation jurisdictions along these commercial corridors, the City should reduce curb cuts and encourage aesthetic improvements that support vibrant and exciting destinations. Commercial land uses may also include high density residential development.

Technology and Innovation

Technology and innovation uses are vibrant, modern developments incorporating a variety of uses, including tech, office, and flexible-use spaces, that are integrated into and complement the existing natural and built environment. The development of Technology and Innovation uses should be encouraged south of Canyon Ferry Road and west of Prickly Pear Creek on the outskirts of the City boundary east of the airport.

Medical and Healthcare

Medical and healthcare uses are designed to accommodate a variety of medical office settings, including corporate group homes and senior living centers. It also may be business parks that typically consist of clusters of office buildings in a campus-like setting, including medical offices, headquarters, and corporate offices. The development of medical office and healthcare uses should be encouraged along and in the vicinity of East Broadway Street, Colonial Drive, Winne Ave, and Saddle Drive, west of I-15 to complement existing land uses and align with Helena's overall character.





Industrial

Industrial land uses are intended to accommodate manufacturing, warehousing, and distribution activities. This land use classification includes both heavy and light industrial areas. Heavy industrial areas include more intense uses that may generate fumes, constant loud noise, or involve hazardous conditions. Typically, these areas are not compatible with residential uses. Light industrial/manufacturing areas focus on less intensive activities such as the assembly of products, storage and distribution of goods, and packaging. These uses typically exclude basic industrial processing and are often more compatible with residential, commercial, and other land uses.

Public/Semi-Public

Public/semi-public land uses include areas utilized for governmental and quasi-governmental purposes such as municipal, county, and state government buildings, schools, non-profit agencies, and community service providers. These land uses provide essential facilities and services to the community. While public/semi-public uses are generally distributed throughout the community, Helena exhibits a higher concentration of these uses compared to other communities due to its status as the state capital and the seat of Lewis and Clark County.

Parks and Open Space

Parks and open space uses encompass large areas of the natural environment and public and private open spaces of varying size and function. Public open space refers to areas that lack formal recreational purposes, but have landscaping, natural flora, and public easements or agreements in place that allow public access. Private open spaces serve a similar function to public open spaces but without public accessibility. These land uses also incorporate important environmental features such as woodlands and stream corridors. Natural open spaces throughout the Helena planning area include areas of land managed by the city, county, state, and federal entities that may require collaboration to maintain and enhance recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

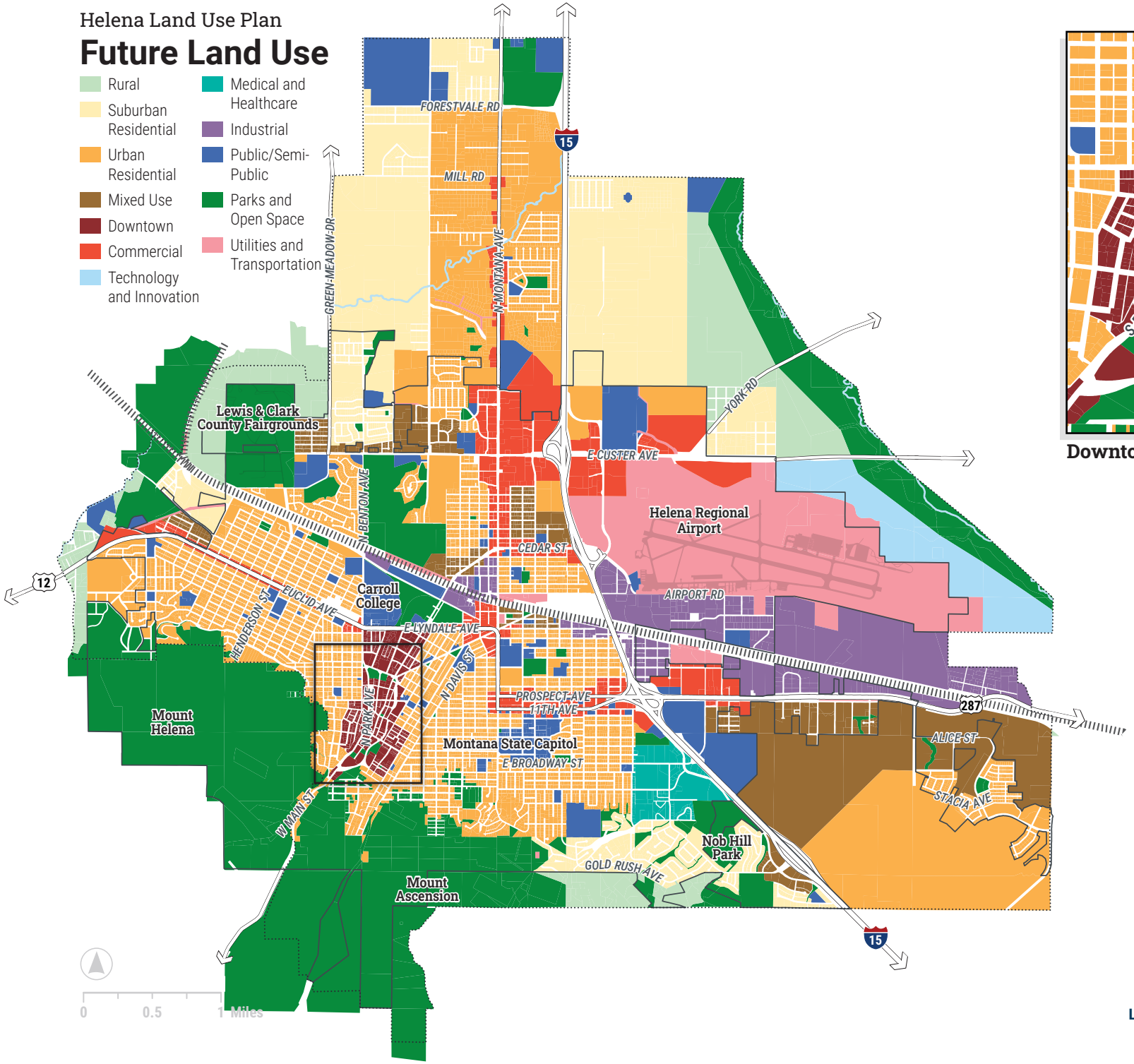
Utilities and Transportation

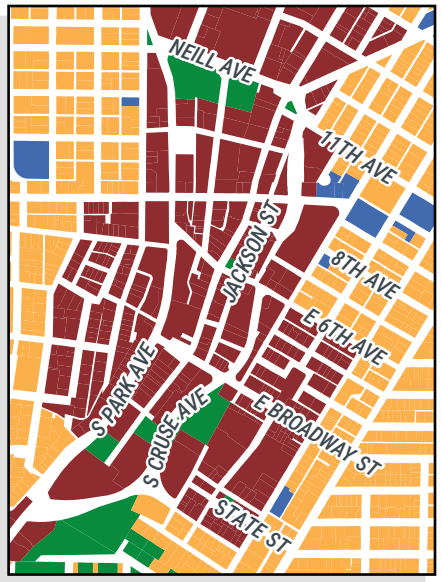
Utilities and transportation land uses include sites and facilities that accommodate critical infrastructure services such as water, sewer, electric, broadband, and transportation right-of-ways. These land uses provide essential facilities and services to the community and are dispersed throughout Helena. Utilities and transportation land uses should be located as needed throughout the community to provide essential services and support economic development.

Helena Land Use Plan

Future Land Use

- Rural
- Suburban Residential
- Urban Residential
- Mixed Use
- Downtown
- Commercial
- Technology and Innovation
- Medical and Healthcare
- Industrial
- Public/Semi-Public
- Parks and Open Space
- Utilities and Transportation





Downtown Helena