



## MEMORANDUM



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**Date:** November 27, 2024

**VIA EMAIL**

**To:** City of Helena, Community Development Department  
Christopher Brink, AICP, Community Development Director  
Ellie Ray, AICP, Senior Planner

**From:** Houseal Lavigne  
Cody Ferguson, AICP, Market Lead | Project Manager  
Josh Koonce, AICP, Planning Practice Lead

**Re:** Vision and Goals Memorandum  
Helena Forward Land Use Plan

This memorandum is intended to serve as an interim deliverable for discussion with staff and the Joint Helena Citizen's Council/Planning Commission and will serve as the foundation for subsequent plan deliverables. The following sections are organized under topical headings that reflect the chapter structure currently being considered for the Plan.

This memorandum includes the vision and goals as well as a preliminary land use framework for the Helena Forward Land Use Plan. The memorandum has been developed based on input received through outreach efforts conducted thus far. They are intended to provide Helena with a sense of direction and priorities before the Land Use Plan is drafted. The following elements provide an outline of plan content to be developed in greater detail in the coming months.

- **Vision:** The vision is an aspirational description of what Helena would like to accomplish in the long-term. The statement is meant to serve as a foundation upon which to base the city's future decision-making. The vision touches on content that will eventually be discussed in the Land Use Plan.
- **Goals:** The goals support the vision and further define what the city is aiming to achieve in the future. They represent broad categories that will help the city realize its vision.
- **Preliminary Land Use Framework:** Providing policy and direction for future land use and development over the next 20 years is the primary function of the Land Use Plan. To support this directive, the Preliminary Land Use Framework section of this memo identifies high level guide for the type and location for future land uses. The Preliminary 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 should be used as a tool for discussion with city staff and elected/appointed officials to gain feedback on the general growth and development policies within the city and its planning area. The agreed upon direction will provide the foundation for developing a more detailed Land Use Plan document.

***NOTE: It is important to remember that each of the following sections in this memorandum is in preliminary draft form. Based on the feedback received, and as the planning process continues in the coming months, these will be adjusted and refined for incorporation into the draft plan document.***

## Vision Statement

Helena is a community rooted in history, opportunity, and legacy. It is an exceptional place to live, work, raise a family, start and grow a business, and visit. Over the next 20 years, Helena will continue to capitalize on its distinctive character, welcoming atmosphere, and plentiful access to public lands to be a livable, resilient, and sustainable community.

Helena strives to:

Be a welcoming, inclusive community, accessible all;

Preserve and celebrate its history, historic neighborhoods, and heritage;

Ensure that growth is thoughtfully planned and upholds community values while meeting community needs;

Be a connected and walkable community;

Support a healthy, and diverse economy that benefits all;

Be resilient and adaptable to meet the challenges of a changing climate;

Support a vibrant art, cultural, and civic environment;

Invigorate and nurture a lively, authentic downtown, create and sustain attractive commercial corridors, and support connected and inviting third spaces;

Be a leader in preserving, conserving, and restoring its natural environment and open space while maintaining and enhancing residents' access to exceptional outdoor recreational opportunities;

Provide quality, efficient municipal services;

Empower citizen involvement and engagement in all community decision-making.

## Guiding Principles

**History** – *Helena preserves and celebrates its rich history and draws on its past as a source of identity, community pride, and wisdom to attract visitors and investment and to support and guide community resilience and sustainability.*

**Opportunity** – *Helena is a community that embraces diversity and possibility where anyone can realize their potential—whether through education, by starting or growing a business, or in its varying land uses and unique neighborhoods.*

**Legacy** – *Helena looks forward to its future while recognizing its debt to the past and its responsibility to generations to come—it is a community dedicated to government transparency and accountability, fiscal responsibility, and protecting the environment.*

## Goals

Goals are broad and long-range desired outcomes. They are ambitious and will require the culmination of incremental actions to be fully achieved. Goals further define what the city is aiming to achieve in the future. The city's planning efforts should work to support these goals.

### Housing

1. Residents will be able to afford and access quality housing throughout Helena's socially diverse and livable neighborhoods.
2. Preserve Helena's historic integrity and small-town character throughout existing and new development.
3. Ensure Helena's zoning code and regulations provide a great amount of flexibility in housing development, enabling creative solutions and denser housing types.

### Economic Development

1. Incentivize high-quality commercial and industrial opportunities that support beautifying major corridors and neighborhoods.
2. Promote a series of neighborhood nodes that embody the character of the area and encourage local businesses to grow.
3. Continue to revitalize Downtown, cementing its status as the central place for entertainment and activities that serve all different ages and lifestyles for residents and visitors alike.

### Transportation and Mobility

1. Promote a transportation network that enables easy access to neighborhoods, community facilities, employment opportunities, and recreation areas.
2. Improve infrastructure and encourage alternative modes of transportation such as walking, bicycling, and public transit for traveling while making roadways and intersections safer and more efficient.

### Public Facilities, Utilities, Infrastructure, and Community Facilities

1. Continue to maintain and improve facilities, services, and infrastructure, ensuring they are reliable for current and future residents.
2. Collaborate with other agencies and jurisdictions to improve public services and accomplish shared goals, recognizing the city's status as the state capital and county seat.
3. Promote sustainable technologies and renewable energy with well-vetted policies and regulations as new technology becomes available.

### Parks, Open Space, and Natural Resources

1. Continue to conserve and steward Montana's land, air, and water and serve as a model for sustainability and resilience.
2. Support an extensive parks, open space and trails network, and continue to monitor opportunities to increase and secure outdoor recreational access and improve the wayfinding and safety of trails.

### Cultural Resources and Tourism

1. Preserve the city's local landmarks and attractions, encouraging a lively and active tourism economy.
2. Continue to support the preservation of Helena's historical structures and maintain the city's heritage and identity.

### Community Character and Urban Design

1. Promote a strong sense of community and personal connections to continue to be an exceptional place to live at all ages and stages of life with a healthy, work-life balance.
2. Maintain and enhance the city's unique character and a charming Downtown and neighborhoods situated in a stunning, accessible natural setting.

# Preliminary Land Use Framework

The Preliminary Land Use Framework provides a high level guide for the type and location of future land uses. The goal of the Land Use Plan is to enhance the character and quality of the city's residential neighborhoods, improve the city's commercial and employment areas, and support a balanced approach to development that preserves natural resources and environmental features.

## 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.

## 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, including single-family attached homes such as townhomes, duplexes, and triplexes to promote greater density and housing variety. 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 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. Commercial land uses may also include high density residential development.

## Office and Business Parks

Office and business park uses are designed to accommodate a variety of general office settings and flexible-use spaces. Business parks typically consist of clusters of office buildings in a campus-like setting, including medical offices, corporate headquarters, and general business offices. The development of office and business park areas should be encouraged along Centennial Drive and Colonial Drive 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 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 surrounding communities due to its status as the state capital and the seat of Lewis and Clark County.

## Parks and Open Space

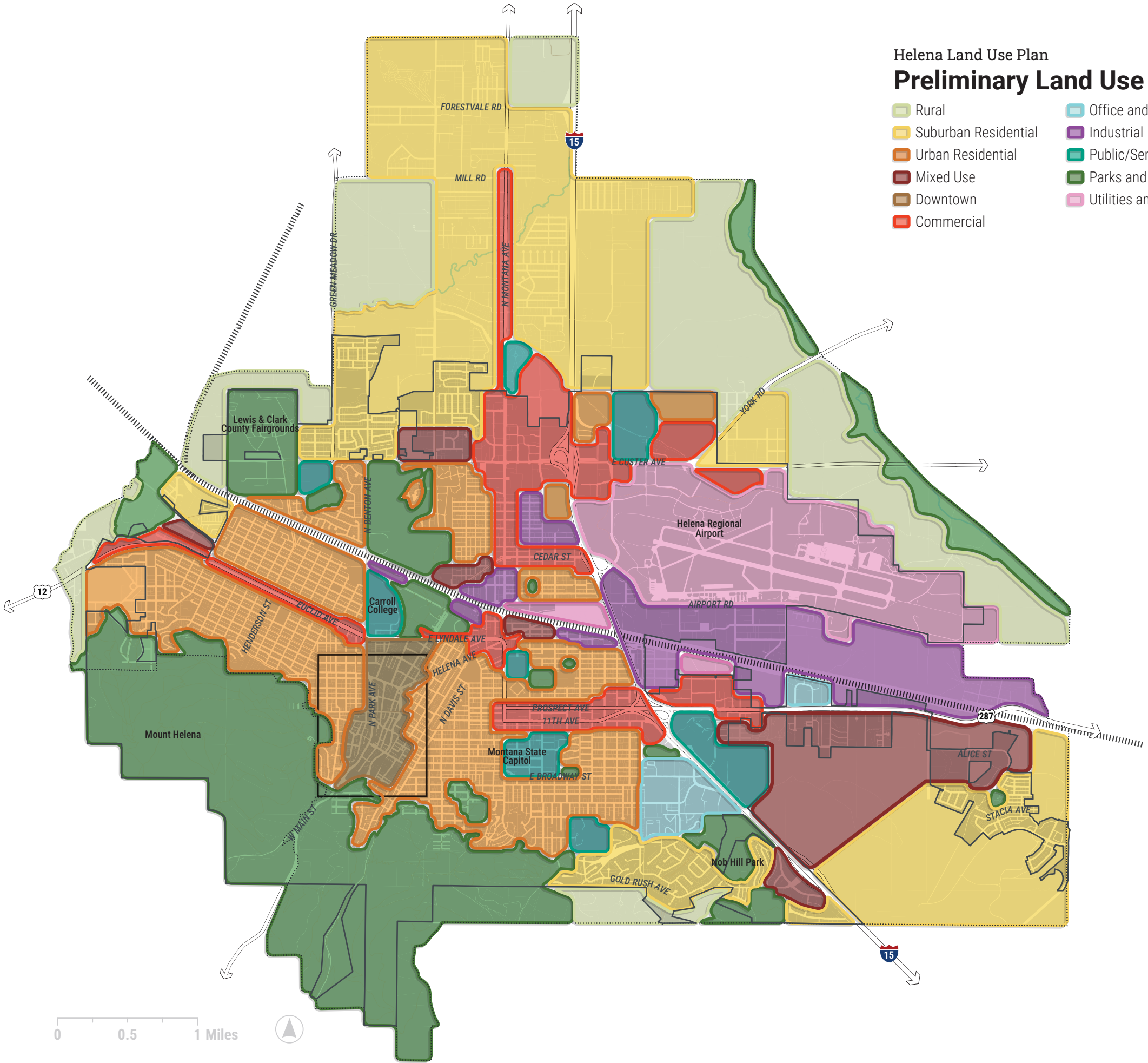
Parks and open space uses encompass large areas of the natural environment and public and private open spaces of varying size and function. Public open space refers to areas that lack formal recreational purposes, but have landscaping, natural flora, and public easements or agreements in place that allow 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 include areas of land managed by the city, county, state, and federal entities that may require collaboration to enhance recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike.

## 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-way. 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  
**Preliminary Land Use Framework**

- |                      |                              |
|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Rural                | Office and Business Parks    |
| Suburban Residential | Industrial                   |
| Urban Residential    | Public/Semi-Public           |
| Mixed Use            | Parks and Open Space         |
| Downtown             | Utilities and Transportation |
| Commercial           |                              |



East  
Helena



**Downtown Helena**