

Neighborhood Investment Program

Purpose

The Program will provide a coordinated, comprehensive approach to strategically invest in Ashland’s existing neighborhoods for the betterment of the community and improve the quality of life for our residents. This effort will be sensitive to the history of the neighborhoods and the community members who have called Ashland home for generations.

Background

Based on the [Future Land Use Map](#), the Town has few remaining vacant residential properties. Sixty-four percent of homes were built prior to 1990, and many are showing their age. Additionally, almost half of Town households (renters and homeowners) are spending 30% or more of their income on their housing expenses (rent or mortgage, utilities, insurance) so it is unlikely they have sufficient funds to perform improvements to their homes (See [Ashland by the Numbers](#)). In addition, tenants may be reluctant to request improvements from the property owner so the Town can act as an impartial intermediary.

Existing Conditions

Before establishing investment strategies, this program should be generally aware of the demographics of the Town. Most of this information will come from the U.S. Census, ESRI, Weldon-Cooper, etc. The information below is a small snapshot of the Town and how it relates to Hanover County and the State. This data will be routinely updated within Ashland by the Numbers.

	Ashland	Hanover	Virginia
Median Household Income	\$48,903	\$84,955	\$68,766
Poverty (percentage of pop.)	17%	5.2%	10.7%
Housing			
Owner-occupied	52.0%	81.3%	66.2%
Median value of owner-occ.	\$186,000	\$267,600	\$255,800
Median rent	\$896	\$1,113	\$1,166
Education			
Highschool graduate or higher	86.6%	92.9%	89.0%

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) states that individuals that pay more than 30-percent of their income towards housing expenses may have difficulty affording non-housing related items such as food, transportation, and medical care. HUD identifies this as being “cost-burdened.” Based on Ashland’s annual median income of \$48,903, a household would need to set aside approximately \$1,222 or less monthly to avoid being cost-burdened.

Currently, the Town of Ashland’s median housing price is \$186,000, which if purchased in today’s market, could result in a monthly payment of \$903.¹ This number does not include fees for utilities such

¹ Based on a standard 30-year fixed loan with an annual interest rate of 3.9-percent, and a 20-percent down-payment of \$37,500. This also includes insurance and property tax.

as water, sewer, and electricity. Relative to other Virginia communities of similar size, Ashland has reasonably attainable housing stock.

This analysis aggregates the cost of housing relative to household income at a town-wide level. It does not account for housing affordability by individual neighborhoods, and the nuance of affordability can vary drastically from neighborhood to neighborhood. It is paramount for Town staff to have a better understanding of the residential housing stock and affordability by neighborhood to avoid the externalities of displacement and gentrification.

Communication and Engagement

Successful neighborhood investment programs are supported by community input to avoid an unbalanced top-down approach. The Town firmly believes that the best and most effective use of the investment strategy will heavily rely on resident and stakeholder participation. This partnership will aid staff in identifying the wants and needs of the communities and will ensure that we are efficient in deploying the investment toolkit. Examples of communication and engagement approaches:

- Flyers delivered to residents about the investment program;
- Identifying community representatives to act as liaisons between residents and Town staff;
- Town staff canvassing neighborhoods to speak directly with residents;
- Program awareness on social media, local publications, local access channel, etc.;
- Routine neighborhood meetings and surveys (How are we doing? What could we do better? Are there other issues that need to be addressed?);
- Adequate notice for residents before a neighborhood event;
- Follow-up meetings with community members after neighborhood events.

Town's Available Services

[insert chart from [nbrhd inv prog spreadsheet](#)]

Acquisition of Property

In limited circumstances, the Town may acquire property that is not being appropriately maintained and has become a community nuisance in accordance with the property maintenance code or is habitually delinquent on tax payments to the Town. This action will only be taken in consultation with the Town Attorney and approval of Town Council. The Town is exploring a partnership opportunity with the Maggie Walker Community Land Trust in connection with Virginia code 15.2-75 to administer this program.

Community Cleanup and Beautification Events

The Town will coordinate with neighborhood groups to periodically host multiday events to target a general cleanup and beautification of public and private property within a designated area. These events may include the assistance of outside organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity and R-MC's students, to support those residents who are not physically or technically able to accomplish specific tasks. The Town's support for these events could include:

- Delivery of a bulk dumpster for use by residents;
- Targeted brush and leaf collection;
- Delivery of mulch from the Town's stockpile;

- Community tree giveaway events (apply to National Wildlife Federation for free native tree seedlings);
- Volunteer help by Town of Ashland staff (add annual employee benefit of 8-16 hours of paid leave specifically for volunteer work);
- Neighborhood Adopt-a-Spot, Street, or Neighborhood programs in conjunction with the “Don’t Trash” regional anti-litter promotion;
- Work with existing agencies and non-profits that participate in similar activities.

Demolition Grant

The Town will offer eligible properties a reimbursement up to \$10,000.00 or 50% of the demolition cost, whichever is less.

Development Incentives

- Fee Reduction - reduced fees for planning actions (ie. CUPs, SEs, etc.) based on targeted areas and income thresholds (ie. 200% or less of Federal poverty guidelines);
- Downtown Residential Development - Without providing more avenues for development throughout the Town as a whole, the lower-income residents can become vulnerable to displacement due to increases in home values caused by a lack of supply. The Town can help stabilize the housing market by encouraging the development of market-rate housing downtown. This can be incentivized by offering financial assistance or being flexible with some development regulations.

Façade Grant

The Town will offer residential property owners a reimbursement up to \$2000.00 or 50% of the total project cost, whichever is less, for improvements in accordance with the existing commercial façade enhancement grant.

Infrastructure Installation and Improvement

The Town will evaluate the condition of the streets, curb and gutter, sidewalks, trails, street lights, and drainage systems. Improvements may include:

- Installation of stormwater systems
- Installation/refurbishment of sidewalks and trails
- Burial of overhead utilities
- Installation of curb and gutter
- Installation of conduit for future fiber expansion
- Installation of streetlights

Neighborhood Group Program

Expand upon existing neighborhood watch groups and encourage the development of groups for unrepresented neighborhoods. Incentivize the sustainment of these groups by awarding each group with \$500.00 annually to be used on a neighborhood project if they can prove they meet at least quarterly. Neighborhood groups are encouraged to coordinate the following activities:

- Temporarily shut down a street for a neighborhood block party

- Snow Buddy Program: Create a program linking able-bodied volunteers with neighbors who are either disabled or cannot for other reasons shovel sidewalks and driveways
- *See Community Cleanup and Beautification Events*

Park Development

In areas identified by the Parks & Recreation Master Plan 2017 that are lacking adequate access to park amenities and/or are not within a ten-minute walk, the Town will attempt to create a micro or neighborhood park through acquisition or long-term lease. Minimum amenities will include a gathering space with benches, picnic tables, trash receptacles, and landscaping.

Property Maintenance Code

The Town can adopt and implement the Property Maintenance Code (13VAC5-63-10), potentially in partnership with Hanover County. This will be enforced on a complaint basis Town-wide except for neighborhoods that are participating in this program. This program includes enforcing a landlord's responsibility to provide a safe and functional dwelling.

Targeted Community Policing

Using the Police Department's *Data Driven Approached to Crime and Traffic Safety (DDACTS)* and *Addressing Complaints Using Technology and Enforcement (ACUTE)* analysis models, determine any selected neighborhood's enforcement and community partnership needs. Needs can be addressed in the following manner:

- Selective traffic safety enforcement
- Foot Patrol
- Bike Patrol
- Security Assessments
- Property Checks
- Neighborhood Watch development
- Crime Prevention Educational Programs

Utility Hookups

To reduce the initial cost of tap fees, the Town will help subsidize the cost for low- to moderate-income individuals who are currently served by well and septic. The Town may also partner with the Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project (SERCAP) as an additional funding source.

Housing Stabilization Opportunities²

Housing stabilization encompasses a broad range of topics such as education, health, the built environment, community context, and economic stability. Above all, a stabilized community ensures that its residents have equitable access to a healthy neighborhood environment. This is a crucial component of the Neighborhood Investment Program as the Town wants to ensure that every resident will experience the benefits of the program.

Many of the topics covered in this section will require long-term planning and implementation efforts. It is critical to incorporate these items into the Town's Comprehensive Plan and other supporting

² Legislation filed for the 2020 General Assembly session may impact the options described in this section.

documents. Routine assessment of the Plan's policies will be required to ensure that they are productive and are achieving their intended stabilization goal.

Infill Development

Available land for new residential development in Ashland diminishes each year. This trend is not necessarily negative, as we are delighted that more people are calling Ashland their home. While we welcome our new neighbors, we should also be cautious that we are not displacing our current residents. The Town is not considering expanding its municipal boundaries; therefore, we need to be creative in providing new infill development opportunities for residential development. This will help keep Ashland's housing stock diverse and attainable for all new *and* current residents.

Infill development is a growth management tool that develops under-used land in urban and suburban areas, and thereby mitigating outward residential expansion into rural territory. Infill is essential for several reasons. First, it can help reduce development pressure on agricultural properties by focusing new construction in urban and suburban places. Secondly, infill typically does not require the expansion of public services such as water, sewer, roads, and sidewalks since the development focus is in already served neighborhoods. Most importantly, infill promotes housing diversity, which in turn provides more options to keep a healthy housing stock.

Accessory Dwelling Units

The Town currently has a few options for infill development in its comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance. Ashland permits accessory dwelling units (ADUs), similarly known as granny flats or mother-in-law suites, within the Town's residential districts upon receiving a conditional use permit (CUP). ADUs are an incidental residential unit on the same lot as a primary residential structure. ADUs can either be separate from the primary home, such as above a detached garage, or ADUs can be constructed within the primary structure, such as in the basement. The benefit of permitting ADUs in Ashland is allowing more residential units in areas that are already served by public services. Another advantage is expanding the housing stock without increasing outward sprawl. Both benefits are core tenants of infill development.

While Ashland's code permits ADUs, it does so in conjunction with a CUP. To obtain a CUP, an individual must pay a submittal fee and present their case to the Planning Commission and Town Council during a public hearing. This is important in denser areas of Ashland as any impact from an ADU is more likely to be experienced by neighboring properties. In less dense areas or in parts of Town that are intended for higher density, the by-right development of ADUs could be permissible without approval from Town Council. Town staff should work to find suitable development standards that will mitigate any nuisance from the ADU to allow for an administrative review and approval. This will make the application process cheaper for the applicant and will reduce staff review time. Town staff should review applicable zoning designations and development standards for the by-right construction of ADUs.

Increasing Homeownership

One of the most common means to grow personal wealth is through homeownership. It also fosters more ownership of a neighborhood and increases social capital. As of 2017, Ashland's homeownership rate was 50%, which is slightly less than the national, state, and county averages. This Program should pursue a homeownership study to increase the homeownership rate in town. This study can include educational home purchasing programs to Town residents, partnering with non-profit agencies for

financial assistance, banking land for the development of mixed income housing, or partnering with existing landlords to convert rental properties to owner-occupied.

Outside Organization Services

The Town will partner with outside organizations to complement the Town's resources and legal authority. Service organizations can be used to coordinate the support needed to conduct improvements on private property, neighborhood groups can provide input to Town staff on their neighborhood's needs and build support for the Town's efforts, and existing entities with adequate administrative capabilities can be partners in addressing needs that the Town is not currently resourced.

Funding

Services outlined in this Program include operations funded through the Town's General Fund (ie. brush collection and code enforcement) and capital improvements financed by the Town's Capital Project Fund (ie. sidewalk construction and drainage improvements). Due to the significant cost of the capital improvements outside funding shall be sought, including but not limited to Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), DEQ grants and private grants. Generally, capital improvements will be funded through the Residential Improvement Program CPF account.