

BLUFFTON



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BEYOND TOMORROW

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INTRODUCTION



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PUBLIC INTERESTS

- MODEST GROWTH
- BUSTLING DOWNTOWN
- RESTAURANTS
- ART/BEAUTIFICATION
- HOUSING OPTIONS
- SIDEWALKS/PATH
- ENTERTAINMENT

The Village of Bluffton approached Lima-Allen County Regional Planning Commission (LACRPC) in 2022 requesting a comprehensive plan to guide development over the next two decades. Bluffton Beyond Tomorrow was conceived by LACRPC staff in conjunction with the Village and a steering committee of 10 volunteer residents. The document is designed to reflect the current state of the community and establish a vision for the future.

Over the next twenty years, the village anticipates change. Protecting the resources, vitality, community engagement and aesthetic of Bluffton are important to all stakeholders. With this comprehensive plan, the steering committee hopes to manage change, while being proactive, flexible, creative and open-minded.

This plan is intended to provide 1) a contemporary snapshot of the community and the perceptions of its residents, leaders and businesses; and 2) a blueprint for growth and improvements in land use, economic development, arts and leisure, and community infrastructure, including action-able strategies at the end of each section. This plan documents the consensus desires of the community for proactive, modest growth.

It is the sincere desire of the steering committee that community leaders, residents and business owners use this plan to inform future decisions and work together to proactively maintain and grow a healthy and vibrant community. The Village will focus on the details of this plan as it is implemented.

Public Participation Process

LACRPC relies on public participation to vet projects and create community buy-in. A sampling ensures the community's willingness and ability to support action steps brought forth by the planning process. An extensive public participation schedule was employed for Bluffton Beyond Tomorrow. The initial assessment was a SWOT analysis completed by the steering committee. From those results, the initial public survey was created and disseminated online with over 600 participants. A follow-up was held both in-person and online returning over 200 results. From there, a cohesive vision for Bluffton was composed. The appendix contains a summary of the survey results which further details the respondents' vision for Bluffton.

The survey respondents praised Bluffton for the quality of life it offers to its residents. The safe, clean, close-knit community is appreciated by residents and visitors who travel from neighboring towns to enjoy the amenities and aesthetic of Bluffton. Survey respondents hope that Bluffton can cultivate and sustain more of those amenities.

A desire for more restaurants and entertainment in Bluffton echoed throughout the survey process. Blufftonites are envisioning enhanced walkability and more attractions for young adults. Diverse housing options and the development of the State Route 103 corridor may aid in the effort of luring more young people to Bluffton.

POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS



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NOTABLE CHARACTERISTICS

- EDUCATED POPULATION
- UNIQUE DEMOGRAPHICS
- HIGHER EARNING POPULACE
- PROJECTED POPULATION GROWTH

Introduction

A municipality's populace is its greatest asset. Understanding its demographics allows officials to make educated, equitable decisions that can affect the trajectory of the entire community. Race, sex, age, income level, educational attainment, and household demographics can all play a role in determining what a community needs to grow and thrive. This section seeks to grow the reader's understanding of the population and identify possible trends and future projections.

The Data

Sourcing data from bona fide origins allows planners to forecast with the highest degree of comfort and accuracy. In the field of urban planning, data is rarely hard and fast. Planning data reflects a snapshot in time or more often an estimation of that frame. People, transportation, and various infrastructure utilizations are innately fluid. In the field of population and demographic estimates, the United States Census Bureau reigns supreme. All population data provided in this report comes from one of two sources; a decennial census or the American Community Survey (ACS) for mid-decade numbers. Data relating to Bluffton University students was gathered from the president's office.

Population Growth

While many American municipalities are facing a decline, Bluffton has a real potential for growth. The Village is projected to serve another 700 residents by 2050, a 19% growth according to LACRPC geometric projections. An increase of 19% would be unusual, but projections are based on past events and Bluffton has experienced similar spikes in population. The next 25 years are crucial as responsible growth is imperative for future generations. The Village can attempt to control the growth with careful zoning, annexation and parcel size restrictions.

The survey participants repeatedly expressed a desire to attract a demographic earning below the ACS 2021 5-year estimated household median income of \$72,000. Zoning for medium or high density housing may attract residents with socioeconomic status closer to the regional mean. These efforts are not foolproof and results may vary.

The American population is aging and Bluffton is no exception. In 2034, for the first time in U.S. history, there will be more people over the age of 65 in the United States than under 18. It is important to note that seniors in larger proportions require access to different needs including: healthcare, housing more suitable to that demographic, exercise and nutrition, transportation, workforce opportunities and opportunities for community engagement, new models of care delivery and others. Becoming an Age-Friendly Community would help ensure these needs are being addressed and Bluffton is connected with the other communities and resources available.

Unique Diversity

Bluffton’s advantage may be found in its demographics. Faculty and students drawn by a liberal arts university provide contrast to the area’s conservative status quo. That political dichotomy mixed with a traditional Mennonite population creates a unique circumstance. It is likely the balancing act of these interests that makes Bluffton unique. The Village, Chamber and University stakeholders currently meet quarterly to stay connected with one another and ensure this unique diversity is currently supported along with planning for the future.

Education & Income

While competing ideas can be difficult to glean from a data table, other Bluffton differentiators are not so abstract. At first glance, Bluffton’s percentage of residents with a high school diploma as the highest academic achievement lags behind Allen County and the state of Ohio, but that is due to Blufftonites completing higher levels of education. Starting with four-year degrees Bluffton pulls away from the pack.

Bluffton outpaced Allen County by threefold regarding graduate degrees per capita. Village residents have earned a graduate or professional degree at the rate of 12%. That is not only a high rate for the county but also for Ohio. The state average is only 8%. According to 2021 ACS estimates, nearly one-third of Bluffton residents have completed a degree program.

The second distinction likely correlated to the former is the relatively high income earned by Bluffton. The 2021 ACS 1-year estimates the household median income of Bluffton to be over \$20,000 of Allen County’s household income of roughly \$51,500 and \$10,000 over Ohio’s household income of \$62,000.

In terms of demographic sectors, the survey respondents feel they are missing a band of the socioeconomic spectrum. There are entry-level employees within the village unable to find homes in Bluffton because of the higher price of real estate. Participants in the public survey have noticed a lack of opportunity for individuals in that income tier.

Education Levels						
Education Status	Allen County Number of Citizens	Village Of Bluffton Number of	Ohio Number of Citizens	Allen County Percent of Total Pop.	Bluffton Percent of Total Pop.	Ohio Percent of Total Pop.
High School	29,856	641	2,664,759	29.4%	16.16%	22.6%
Some College	13,530	393	1,561,547	13.3%	9.91%	13.3%
Associates	7,223	187	727,443	7.1%	4.71%	6.2%
Bachelor	7,964	588	1,536,624	7.8%	14.82%	13.0%
Graduate or Professional degree	4,630	481	957,286	4.6%	12.13%	8.1%
Total	63,203	2,290	7,447,659	62.2%	57.73%	63.2%

2021 ACS Census

Residential Land Use Projection	
Year	Square Footage
2020	1,711,974
2025	1,669,196
2030	1,786,330
2035	1,903,464
2040	2,020,597
2045	2,137,731
2050	2,254,865

POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Maintain quarterly meetings between Village staff, Chamber and University stakeholders, and any other activities that encourage the relationship between the village and the university.

Review steps necessary to create a charter form of government and other steps to ensure Bluffton is prepared for the future census count when a population of 5,000 is recorded. This population would designate Bluffton as a city.

Village Administration should continue to work with the Senior Citizens Center to ensure Bluffton becomes and remains an Age-Friendly Community.

SITE & SITUATION



Photo courtesy of JB Nygaard Photography

Introduction

Understanding the community's foundational layer is imperative to foster responsible development. An area's historic, geologic, geographic, climate and drainage patterns are staples of any comprehensive plan. Familiarity with these topics encourages development in the most suitable locations and aids policymakers in ensuring residents utilize community resources optimally.

History, Government & Attributes

In the northeast corner of Allen County and the southwest quadrant of Hancock County, the Village of Bluffton houses roughly 4,000 permanent residents according to the 2020 decennial census. The village is nearly equidistant from Lima and Findlay, the seats to their respective counties. Bluffton is one of the area's quainter establishments featuring a downtown area with amenities valued by residents and neighbors alike.

Bluffton operates as a statutory Village by the Ohio Revised Code. The council is composed of six council members elected by the citizens at large. Village Council terms are four years serving as the legislative committee for the Village. As the Chief Elected Officer for Bluffton, the Mayor presides over the legislative body during a four-year term.

The Village Council appoints an administrator to serve at the pleasure of the Council and Mayor. The Village Administrator manages daily business in the Village and executes procedures and policies established by the Village Council. The police, fire and emergency medical services chief are approved by Council after the Mayor's appointment.

Climate & Natural Features

The glacial pass that produced the Great Lakes shaped northwest Ohio with distinct geologic and topographic characteristics. A flat landscape is a result of that movement which can lead to drainage challenges under various circumstances. Bluffton has little change in topography outside of the quarries on the southwest side.

The lack of altitudinal change nurtured the conception of the Great Black Swamp for centuries. The 7,000 square mile swampland adjoining Lake Erie was the defining feature of northwestern Ohio which deposited fertile soil that helped establish the area as an agricultural center. The completion of the Miami-Erie Canal and other drainage efforts by European settlers drained the swamp over time. Some flooding in the area is not uncommon and Bluffton is no exception. The village drains to Bluffton operated and maintained stormwater facilities and subsequently Riley Creek, part of the Blanchard River watershed.

The region experiences hot summers and cold winters. This climate contributes to the area's penchant as an agricultural producer with a long growing season of five to six months. The National Weather Service lists that the average annual precipitation is 37.2 inches. Roughly 20 inches fall between May and October. That encapsulates the growing season. On average, 40 days per annum have at least one inch of snow on the ground, but there are wide ranges from year to year.

Floodplains & Wetland

The Village of Bluffton experiences occasional flooding. Flooding can be problematic, but that does not mean floodplains are rendered useless. Low-impact structures like walking paths or playground equipment can be a popular amenity for residents and an efficient way to utilize ground prone to standing water after heavy rainfall.

Repetitive flooding can pose a significant safety risk to citizens. Damage to private property and critical public infrastructure easily occurs in the proper circumstance. That circumstance is brought closer when the current system is under stress. Village officials and steering committee members feel the Village flood hazard reduction strategy needs to be upgraded. A general plan follows:

1. Update and strengthen the Village's Flood Plain Regulations.

FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) requires any community wishing to utilize the NFIP (National Flood Insurance Program) to adopt the federal minimum flood management regulations. In order to help protect the community, Bluffton can implement more stringent requirements for development within special flood hazard areas. Elements such as compensatory storage, mandatory cut-fill balances, and increased engineering study requirements can all be effective while promoting responsible development.

2. Promote development outside of the special flood hazard area (SFHA).

The best way to control the flooding of structures is to place them outside of the limits of the special flood hazard area. The Village should put into place a policy of development inside the SFHA as a last resort. Any development that can reasonably be located elsewhere should be.

3. Encourage the use of best management practices.

In addition to the volume of precipitation, other significant factors determining the severity of a flood are the time of concentration (time it takes runoff to find its way to the stormwater system) and infiltration rate (volume of water absorbed into the ground before finding surface drainage). By implementing surfaces that slow runoff and allow water to enter the earth, the total amount of water the stormwater management system handles can be dramatically reduced, mitigating flood severity.



Photo courtesy of JB Nygaard Photography

4. Implement detention or retention in flood-prone areas and as part of new development. The village should require compensatory retention or detention as part of new proposed developments. These areas provide additional storage and mitigate the effect of additional impervious surfaces on the volume of surface water runoff. The Village can also implement these practices in flood-prone areas to allow for additional water storage.

5. Locate and evaluate potential sites for hard infrastructure improvements. The Village should work with other local agencies as well as state and federal entities to locate and develop sites for the express purpose of flood mitigation. Optimal areas will overlap jurisdictions (corridor along I-75 for instance) and will be areas that traditionally experience repetitive flooding.

FLOOD MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Update & strengthen floodplain regulations.

Promote development outside of special flood hazard area.

Encourage use of best management practices.

Implement detention or retention in flood prone areas in conjunction with development.

Locate & evaluate potential sites for hard infrastructure improvement.

INFRASTRUCTURE



Photo courtesy of JB Nygaard Photography

Residential Land Use Projection	
Year	Square Footage
2020	1,711,974
2025	1,669,196
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2050	2,254,865

Housing

Municipalities across the nation are reviewing housing supply data as societal evolutions change requirements. The number of occupants per home is decreasing and the average home is growing in square footage. Our earliest pertinent data for Bluffton was collected in 1970. Just over 50 years ago, each resident averaged 325 square feet of living space with the mean home spanning 1,500 square feet. The most recent decennial census in 2020 identified the average home size in Bluffton as 2,465 square feet, raising the living space to resident ratio to 431 square feet to one resident (*Allen County Auditor data).

Similar statistics could be tracked in most American municipalities and it is costly. Dense populations are the goal because they are efficient. Running utilities 2,000 feet to 10 homes returns less revenue than the same distance for 20 homes. Income tax returns far more capital to the municipality than property taxes on large lots with proportional homes. Growing a population without increasing the footprint mitigates problems caused by sprawl, a post-war term coined for phenomena like suburbanization which pulls residents from neighborhoods once densely constructed to the homes of today built on larger lots.

Residents have identified a need for more housing in every stratification including starter homes for young people working in Bluffton who wish to live in the corporation limits. There are few housing options on the market in Bluffton. There are even fewer options for those earning the median household income for Allen County residents. As the population ages, seniors will begin to seek smaller properties that require less upkeep than traditional single-family dwellings.

High-density housing will solve both identified housing hurdles within Bluffton. Townhomes, condominiums and apartments could provide housing at a lower cost for working-age people wishing to relocate to Bluffton. Developments of a higher density than Bluffton's current average are a projected necessity as Bluffton grows. By 2050, Bluffton will require an additional 30% of housing space if things progress as expected according to LACRPC projections. Such an increase will require a sizable dedication of land to house new Blufftonites.

Infill development or building on parcels that are underutilized is an efficient way to maximize the land use of Bluffton's current footprint. This may involve mixed-use zoning. Mixed-use zoning is a growing trend that contradicts the planning philosophies of yesteryear which grouped congruently zoned parcels together. Mixed-use zoning allows multiple land uses in the same development area or even the same building.

Perhaps the most common instance of mixed-use zoning is vertical mixed-use. Often taking place in downtown buildings with commercial use on the ground floor and living space on the floors above, a common occurrence since the suburbanization of the American city drove retail and restaurant space outward. Housing and commercial uses in the same development are becoming more common as cities fight to revitalize. Mixed-use zoning maximizes vital real estate, boosting vibrancy in a given area and revenue for the Village.

Walking and Biking

There has been a recent emphasis on increasing the linear mileage of active transportation facilities. Compliant sidewalks are required by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and active transportation has been a priority in a county where the number of overweight and obese residents is inordinately high. Bluffton's multi-use trail network, although incomplete, is lauded by residents calling for additional mileage in the public survey. Aside from a splash pad, additional multi-use trail mileage was one of the most popular requests for infrastructure that stemmed from public participation. There is multi-use path construction for State Route 103 to connect the residential land use to the commercial district near Interstate 75.

The Village of Bluffton has adopted a Complete Streets plan to optimize roadways and public rights-of-way (ROW) for bicycle and pedestrians along with automobiles, reducing inherent conflicts which result in serious injury. There is also an ADA Transition Plan underway for facilities within the ROW. In conjunction, these plans will elevate the sidewalk concerns of the public.

Village Parks

In an active community, park space is coveted. Bluffton has a variety of facilities for people looking to exercise. The Village owns Village Park and Buckeye Park along with bodies of water large enough to kayak, basketball courts, the Village pool, and the well-beaten walking paths. Survey participants supported an additional park located near the tennis courts on East College or Bluffton University Nature Preserve as documented in the public participation process.

Soft Infrastructure

The softer side of infrastructure involves village-owned services, i.e. Public Safety Department of the Village of Bluffton. Bluffton offers fire protection, emergency medical services and a police department. The comprehensive planning process revealed obstacles for the Public Safety Department. The EMS department is struggling to procure an adequate number of volunteers as the baby boomer generation ages into retirement.

Airport

The Village of Bluffton owns one of two airports in Allen County. The airport is operated by Village partners, Bluffton Flying Service (BFS). BFS services include flight training, hangar rental, and aircraft maintenance. The Bluffton Airport has been an asset to locals by way of bringing tax revenue to the Village and providing facilities to the Life Flight Network.

Town Hall

Bluffton's historic Town Hall was constructed nearly 140 years ago in the late 19th century. In 2007, the building was renovated to the tune of \$2.5M. Today, 154 N. Main Street is home to offices for Bluffton's administrative staff and Chamber of Commerce. The third-floor hosts events like Village Council meetings and is open to Bluffton residents for rent.

Miscellaneous

While drinking water is sourced from the neighboring Village of Ottawa, Bluffton does own its wastewater treatment plant. The Village owns other infrastructure to provide services for its residents. Maintenance buildings, a brush dump and community garden to name a couple. The appendix contains Map Q depicting parcels owned by the Village.



STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Encourage more high density housing.

Prioritize infill development including mixed-use zoning.

Continue to increase walkability for residents of the community.

Continue status as an Energy Special Improvement District to allow for Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) Financing- Encourage property owners to maintain and revitalize existing Commercial/mixed use spaces (especially downtown).

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

(CONTINUED)

Explore annexation opportunities with surrounding townships.

Add additional public park(s) within the corporation limits.

Continue to increase connectivity for pedestrian travel and walkability residents of the community.

Continue to review and support the EMS Department

Review current zoning districts and update where needed.

ECONOMY

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NOTABLE STATISTICS

LEADING EMPLOYERS

- MANUFACTURING
- HEALTHCARE
- EDUCATION

- 672 WORKING & LIVING IN BLUFFTON
- 2,100 JOBS IN BLUFFTON

Household Income				
Subdivision	Ohio	Allen	Lima	Bluffton
Households	4,754,161	40,671	14,156	1,456
Less than \$10,000	6.2%	6.4%	12.1%	3.9%
\$10,000 to \$14,999	4.2%	4.1%	6.5%	3.4%
\$15,000 to \$24,999	8.7%	10.4%	13.1%	8.5%
\$25,000 to \$34,999	9.1%	9.9%	14.9%	4.6%
\$35,000 to \$49,999	12.7%	15.2%	18.8%	13.3%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	18.0%	18.7%	17.3%	20.8%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	13.2%	14.0%	9.3%	17.3%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	15.5%	13.9%	6.1%	17.6%
\$150,000 to \$199,999	6.3%	4.6%	1.3%	7.7%
\$200,000 or more	6.2%	2.7%	0.6%	2.9%
Median income (dollars)	61,938	55,114	37,668	72,361
Mean income (dollars)	83,820	69,845	46,487	84,329
ACS 2021 5 year estimate				

The household income of Bluffton skews more affluent than the surrounding area. The wealth separation from county seat Lima commences around \$100,000 per household. A populace with disposable income is a decisive advantage in a local economy. It is estimated that nearly three percent of households in the village gross over \$200,000 annually, compared to Lima at only .7%. Allen County has much higher average incomes than Lima. Still, only half as many county households, per capita, earn over \$150,000 as Bluffton (2021: ACS 5-year estimates).

Bluffton's economy is propped up by industry on the outskirts of the municipality. Manufacturers like Grob, SumiRiko and Diamond Manufacturing line the northern corporation limits. Manufacturing accounts for one third of the jobs in Bluffton. There are more jobs in Bluffton than working residents.

Considering Bluffton's size, its employer presence is substantial. The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) recorded over 2,100 employees within the corporation limits of Bluffton in 2020. Manufacturing, healthcare and education lead Bluffton employment by numbers.

The major employment sectors in Bluffton have a balance between white collar and blue collar positions. The manufacturing presence contrasts with the large fractions of healthcare and higher education that attract employees with differing backgrounds, skill sets and perspectives. It plays into the diversity that has shaped Bluffton into something out of the ordinary.

ECONOMY

Downtown Bluffton has an economic presence of its own. Those details will be explored in a chapter to follow. A mix of retail, banks, financial consultants, insurance, restaurants, etc., line Main Street, Bluffton. The majority of residential units above downtown businesses are currently occupied.

There are about 1,570 residents in the workforce including teens at least 16 years of age in the 2021: ACS 5-year estimates. About 125 of those folks work from home. OnTheMap tool provided by the United States Census Bureau estimated 672 people both living and working in Bluffton in 2019. The average commute for those workers is about 20 minutes, a notion supported by anecdotal evidence that many Blufftonites are either employed in Lima or Findlay, the county seats of Allen and Hancock.

The 2021 ACS suggests Bluffton has a strong presence of residents working in education services, healthcare and social assistance sector. This is one sector where Bluffton separates itself from both Allen County and the state of Ohio. The village has 16% of its working population in the sector while the state and county have 11.6% and 10.4% respectively.

Bureau of Labor Statistics

Nationally, Bluffton's leading industry, manufacturing, is projected to lose employment by .1%, but the BLS does have some promising projections for Bluffton. The healthcare and social assistance sector is strongly represented within the demographics of resident employment. That sector is projected to be among the highest growing in the country. Education is the third largest employer of Bluffton residents. It is tied for second regarding the fast-growing sectors in America.

Employment Sector						
Employment Sector	Allen County	Ohio Number of Citizens	Village of Bluffton Number of Citizens	Allen County Percent of Total Pop.	Bluffton Percent of Total Pop.	Ohio Percent of Total Pop.
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting, and Mining	605	53,324	0	0.6%	N/A	0.5%
Construction	2,539	325,010	74	2.5%	1.9%	2.8%
Manufacturing	9,947	849,726	328	9.8%	8.3%	7.2%
Wholesale Trade	1,079	142,847	51	1.1%	1.3%	1.2%
Retail Trade	5,471	631,983	135	5.4%	3.4%	5.4%
Transportation and Warehousing, and Utilities	2,676	314,961	40	2.6%	1.0%	2.7%
Information	526	82,967	0	0.5%	0.0%	0.7%
Finance and Insurance, and Real Estate and Rental Leasing	1,791	370,038	58	1.8%	1.5%	3.1%
Professional, Scientific, and Management, and Administrative and Waste Management Services	3,339	559,884	84	3.3%	2.1%	4.8%
Education Services, and Health Care and Social Assistance	10,566	1,366,252	642	10.4%	16.2%	11.6%
Arts, Entertainment, and recreation, and Accommodation and Food Services	4,094	494,427	118	4.0%	3.0%	4.2%
Other Services, Except Public Administration	2,175	243,656	63	2.1%	1.6%	2.1%
Public Administration	1,636	221,388	55	1.6%	1.4%	1.9%
Total (If Appli.)	46,444	5,656,463	1,648	45.7%	41.5%	48.0%

2021 ACS Census

DOWNTOWN

Photo courtesy of JB Nygaard Photography



Improving an Asset

Bluffton is known locally as one of the quaintest villages in Northwest Ohio. Its downtown storefronts boast a 100% occupancy rate, unlike American municipalities ravaged by suburbanization that suffer from underdeveloped parcels with empty storefronts and vacant lots. Bluffton has retail space, a movie theater, restaurants, primary healthcare, and other professional services downtown, a rarity in small-town Ohio.

Not surprisingly, Bluffton residents appreciate the downtown's value, which also attracts folks regionwide. Community members have identified even more potential to be harvested. Residents have expressed a desire to attract more visitors downtown. Over 90% of residents share a vision of downtown bustling with pedestrians, moving from one establishment to the next.

Trip Generators and Pedestrians

America's optimally functioning downtowns share two common traits- worthy attractions and pedestrian activity. Pedestrian activity is the backbone of vibrant downtowns. Centralized parking is key as it produces pedestrian traffic for the entire downtown, not just one enterprise. A surplus of parking is a negative characteristic for downtowns. The target rate for parking occupancy is 85%. The optics of a bustling downtown are enhanced when most of the parking is being utilized. The steering committee noted a perceived parking shortage. A parking study may be required to accurately assess the occupancy rates.

Several survey participants remarked that some downtown businesses are not generating many trips. A downtown sustains vitality through trip generators. The Institute of Transportation Engineers conducts studies for its Trip Generation manual to illustrate the difference in trips made to a commercial property based on land use. In a properly orchestrated downtown, a rising tide raises all vessels.

On the average weekday, an office building may generate 3.3 trips per employee. A restaurant, however, generates 127 trips per 1,000 square feet of gross floor space. Assuming both businesses are open Monday – Friday, the same 1,000 square feet would generate nearly 28,000 more trips a year, on weekdays alone. On a weekday, an office would need 38 employees to generate as many trips as a fairly small sit-down restaurant.

Zoning and Mixed Uses

Vandalia, Ohio is electing to employ an overlay district to foster the right mix of businesses to bring traffic to its downtown. An overlay district is an area that applies zoning over existing zoning regulations. The Montgomery County municipality is incentivizing businesses to relocate or originate downtown through tax breaks for businesses with preferential land use. Vandalia is targeting businesses like coffee shops, mixed-use buildings, microbreweries, etc., all of which fit Bluffton's vision for the long term.

Mixed-use zoning is becoming more popular as a way to invigorate downtown areas. Mixed-use concepts are the future of planning. They create more efficient use of space. Bluffton does employ some mixed-use in the form of residential units above downtown stores. According to a survey performed by a steering committee member, 50 of these apartments are occupied. Private-public partnerships have proven useful in communities resurrecting residential spaces downtown. The steering committee expressed a consensus supporting the preservation of the historic look of Bluffton. Walking the line between encouraging period-correct renovation and stifling improvement in a much-needed building can be difficult. These improvements are governed by building codes that may need reevaluation.

The Outdoor Experience

When the goal is to increase pedestrian usage of the downtown right of way, safety is paramount. Traffic calming is a concept that originated in Europe to describe transportation engineering tools that help automobiles and pedestrians coexist in the same space. Noise pollution from freight traffic can also be detrimental to the outdoor experience and mitigated with traffic calming.

Bluffton has already upgraded its downtown infrastructure with traffic calming measures via the bump outs on Main Street, which increase the visibility of pedestrians and narrow the perception of lane width to slow vehicular traffic. Further traffic calming measures can be implemented to increase the safety of pedestrians and discourage unnecessary freight traffic on Main Street. Speed tables could be particularly effective in this role.

Survey respondents remarked on the lack of entertainment opportunities for young adults in Bluffton. Downtown is the perfect venue to host more entertainment—possibly with very little new infrastructure required. A DORA or Designated Outdoor Refreshment Area could be an appealing update to Bluffton's landscape. Within a DORA, downtown shoppers and diners may walk from one enterprise to the next with an open container. These areas are springing up statewide to inspire vitality in downtown areas.

Closing Vine Street from North Main Street to the alley east of Jackson would create an outdoor entertainment space within the DORA. The area spans over 7,500 square feet and could be a small, intimate venue for performers and a place for DORA customers to enjoy the outdoors. Entertainment in a unique space would draw locals from around the area. Some of the cost may be offset by the savings of maintaining one less intersection.

The survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the downtown area could be improved by more beautification. There may be an opportunity to program with Bluffton University in order to procure artwork. Those aesthetic enhancements boost the quality of life for residents and attract more people to the area.

Family Attractions

Attractions for young children are trip generators too. A splash pad was one of the highest survey responses for new amenities the public would like to see in Bluffton. Often splash pads are accessories to public pools, but municipalities have been implementing the seasonal attraction in downtown areas as well.

Bluffton's downtown may be the crown jewel of the municipality. Still, savvy residents see a greater potential. The Bluffton community envisions more activity downtown. More trip generators, more residents via mixed-use zoning leads to more revenue for the Village, while lessening the tax burden on residents for additional amenities. Maintaining the charming character and flourishing aspect of Bluffton requires continued work to make the most of the village's assets and opportunities.



STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Employ overlay district with tax breaks to attract businesses downtown.

Install traffic calming devices to enhance pedestrian safety and reduce conflict with vehicular traffic.

Enact Designated Outdoor Refreshment Area (DORA), or equivalent, to generate more business for downtown enterprises.

Close east end of Vine Street to create small outdoor venue.

Construct splash pad to bring families to the commercial area.

Encourage private-public partnerships to support period-correct renovations and help maintain historic properties.

Conduct a parking study to assess on-street and public parking capacity, including parking on Vine Street.

DEVELOPMENT



Often municipalities clamor for growth, but growth in and of itself is not necessarily a net positive. Growth must be paired with foresight and strategies to accommodate its side effects. The village is destined for growth and Bluffton's administration has been proactive by contracting with Choice One Engineering for a land use study in conjunction with a State Route 103 corridor study on the frontier of expansion.

Section three of the report details future development in terms of commercial and residential space and offers recommendations for future roadways. Rather than duplicate the work of Choice One, Bluffton Beyond Tomorrow simply recognizes the report and supports the recommendations found in the engineering study.

The Village has successfully positioned themselves for projected growth amidst decline of the Midwestern village. The Bluffton Beyond Tomorrow Steering Committee has expressed a valid concern regarding the governmental status. A city designation is a drastic change requiring increased regulation which becomes more complicated and costly. Bluffton is approximately 1,000 residents away from becoming a city.

Infill development is already underway in the village. From an efficiency standpoint, developing underdeveloped buildings, parcels or areas already annexed should be the priority. This strategy allows the Village to maximize the utilities already in place.

Residential Development

In 1970, the average Bluffton home was almost 1,000 sq. ft. smaller than today. Since 1970, there have been three decades which have been marked by housing booms, 1970s, 1990s and 2000s. In those eras, Bluffton residents favored larger homes, so much so that the average home grew by 63.4% relative to 1970 (Allen County Auditor). Thus, larger lot sizes were required.

The charm of Bluffton lies in the densely nestled, exceptionally maintained older homes. One quarter of the housing was built before the United States entry to the Second World War. Often older homes in that ratio are a liability. Old homes require more maintenance and for many families, properly executing those renovations is cost prohibitive resulting in blighted conditions. By keeping historical architecture visually appealing, Bluffton has created a rare aesthetic in the region.

2050 projections by LACRPC call for an additional 30% (542,891 square feet) of housing from the 2020 assessment of 1.7 million square feet. These projections are based on historical evolution and could be mitigated by some of the higher-density housing that the survey participants have supported. Currently, the average home in Bluffton is about 2,465 square feet.

DEVELOPMENT

Mixed-use development can be a useful tool in revitalizing an area in need of new energy, but it is not advisable universally. Bluffton has succeeded in keeping industry separate from residential use, and in the case of heavy industry, that delineation ought to be maintained. Many cities today are finding it necessary to locate light industry with housing in order to provide additional housing. Light industry and residential use can coexist, but it is typically born of necessity.

Bluffton has a fair amount of federally regulated floodplain within the corporation limits. Some of that floodplain has already been developed. Moving forward, the Village should discourage further development of those areas regarding high-impact structures. Residential, commercial and industrial development should be targeted outside the floodplain at all costs. Impactful development pushes flood waters out of the floodplain making conditions more uncertain. Floodplains do not have to be a wasteland; low-impact structures can provide residents value within floodplains.

Commercial Development

There were 231 acres dedicated to commercial land use in 2020. In 2050, a projected 247 acres of land in the village will be dedicated to commercial use. Determining what industries will expand may be found in the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data for employment projections found in the Economy section.

The study, performed by Choice One Engineering, identified a need for additional capacity to accommodate projected traffic volumes. Choice One also recommended crosswalks for pedestrians and bike lanes to provide enough road width to encourage cycling. The corridor spans two counties and routinely violates ODOT's access management plan. The average space between driveways is only 134 feet, far short of the 250 feet recommended by ODOT on roads within the agency's control. Poor access management often results in a worse level of service, more crashes and a reduction in roadway capacity.

During the public participation process, questions arose regarding the development of the Bentley Road exit. That corridor is best serving agricultural interests. It would be wise to encourage development on the SR 103 corridor where the infrastructure is being prepared to adequately serve commercial and residential expansion. That corridor should be thoroughly developed before eyeing Bentley Road for expansion.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Continue implementing Choice One's State Route 103 construction project to set up corridor for future development.

Maintain smaller lot sizes in areas of historic Bluffton to preserve the revered aesthetic.

Write code for existing mixed-use zoning to accurately reflect land use.

With future developments, continue to keep heavy industry separate from residential areas.



Photo courtesy of JB Nygaard Photography

APPENDIX

BLUFFTON BEYOND TOMORROW

Thank You

The Lima-Allen County Regional Planning Commission would like to thank the Steering Committee for their efforts in shaping the vision for the future of Bluffton. The Steering Committee was placed by the Village of Bluffton to represent the interests of the general public throughout the comprehensive planning process. Public participation in this project was maximized partly because of the Steering Committee's dedication to Bluffton Beyond Tomorrow. Members of the steering committee include:

Steve Ritter
Neil Hauenstein
Tom Downey
Joan Frederitz
Paula Scott
George Lehman
Liz Gordon-Hancock
Brendan Matthews
Jannie Derstine
Lynda Nyce

A special thanks to Jamie Nygaard for providing professional photography of Bluffton and its residents.

Education Levels

Education Status	Allen County Number of Citizens	Village Of Bluffton Number of	Ohio Number of Citizens	Allen County Percent of Total Pop.	Bluffton Percent of Total Pop.	Ohio Percent of Total Pop.
High School	29,856	641	2,664,759	29.4%	16.16%	22.6%
Some College	13,530	393	1,561,547	13.3%	9.91%	13.3%
Associates	7,223	187	727,443	7.1%	4.71%	6.2%
Bachelor	7,964	588	1,536,624	7.8%	14.82%	13.0%
Graduate or Professional degree	4,630	481	957,286	4.6%	12.13%	8.1%
Total	63,203	2,290	7,447,659	62.2%	57.73%	63.2%

2021 ACS Census

Residents in Workforce

Employment Status	Allen County Number of Citizens (16+)	Village of Bluffton Number of Citizens (16+)	Allen County Percent of Total Pop.	Village of Bluffton Percent of Total Pop.
Employed	46444	1,648	45.68%	41.54%
Unemployed	3033	110	2.98%	2.77%
Armed Forces	59	0	0.06%	0.00%
not in Labor Force	31692	1,190	31.17%	30.00%
Total	81228	2948	79.89%	74.31%

2021 ACS

Employment Sector

Employment Sector	Allen County	Ohio Number of Citizens	Village of Bluffton Number of Citizens	Allen County Percent of Total Pop.	Bluffton Percent of Total Pop.	Ohio Percent of Total Pop.
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting, and Mining	605	53,324	0	0.6%	N/A	0.5%
Construction	2,539	325,010	74	2.5%	1.9%	2.8%
Manufacturing	9,947	849,726	328	9.8%	8.3%	7.2%
Wholesale Trade	1,079	142,847	51	1.1%	1.3%	1.2%
Retail Trade	5,471	631,983	135	5.4%	3.4%	5.4%
Transportation and Warehousing, and Utilities	2,676	314,961	40	2.6%	1.0%	2.7%
Information	526	82,967	0	0.5%	0.0%	0.7%
Finance and Insurance, and Real Estate and Rental Leasing	1,791	370,038	58	1.8%	1.5%	3.1%
Professional, Scientific, and Management, and Administrative and Waste Management Services	3,339	559,884	84	3.3%	2.1%	4.8%
Education Services, and Health Care and Social Assistance	10,566	1,366,252	642	10.4%	16.2%	11.6%
Arts, Entertainment, and recreation, and Accommodation and Food Services	4,094	494,427	118	4.0%	3.0%	4.2%
Other Services, Except Public Administration	2,175	243,656	63	2.1%	1.6%	2.1%
Public Administration	1,636	221,388	55	1.6%	1.4%	1.9%
Total (If Appl.)	46,444	5,656,463	1,648	45.7%	41.5%	48.0%

2021 ACS Census

Village of Bluffton-Average Household Size

Household Type	Household Size
Married-couple family household	3.20
Male householder, no spouse present	3.80
Female householder, no spouse present	2.52

Village of Bluffton-Household by Type

Household Type	Number of Households	% of Total Households
Married-couple family household	771	53.0%
Male householder, no spouse present	35	2.4%
Female householder, no spouse present	119	8.2%
Non family household	531	36.5%
Total	1,456	100.00%

2021 ACS 5 year estimates

Household Income

Subdivision	Ohio	Allen	Lima	Bluffton
Households	4,754,161	40,671	14,156	1,456
Less than \$10,000	6.2%	6.4%	12.1%	3.9%
\$10,000 to \$14,999	4.2%	4.1%	6.5%	3.4%
\$15,000 to \$24,999	8.7%	10.4%	13.1%	8.5%
\$25,000 to \$34,999	9.1%	9.9%	14.9%	4.6%
\$35,000 to \$49,999	12.7%	15.2%	18.8%	13.3%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	18.0%	18.7%	17.3%	20.8%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	13.2%	14.0%	9.3%	17.3%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	15.5%	13.9%	6.1%	17.6%
\$150,000 to \$199,999	6.3%	4.6%	1.3%	7.7%
\$200,000 or more	6.2%	2.7%	0.6%	2.9%
Median income (dollars)	61,938	55,114	37,668	72,361
Mean income (dollars)	83,820	69,845	46,487	84,329

ACS 2021 5 year estimate

Village of Bluffton Population by Age & Gender						
AGE	Male Population	%	FemalePopulation	%	Total	% Total of Age Cohort
< 5 years	131	7.10%	132	6.70%	263	6.90%
5-14 years	253	13.70%	332	16.90%	585	15.30%
15-24 years	398	21.50%	201	0.102	599	15.70%
25-34 years	83	4.40%	270	0.137	353	9.20%
35-44 years	280	15.20%	188	9.60%	468	12.20%
45-54 years	180	9.70%	181	9.20%	361	9.50%
55-64 years	186	10.00%	177	9.00%	363	9.50%
65-74 years	220	11.90%	228	11.60%	448	11.70%
75-84 years	99	5.40%	158	8.00%	257	6.70%
85+ yeaars	21	1.10%	102	5.20%	123	3.20%
Total	1851	100.00%	1969	1.001	3820	100.00%
2021 ACS 5 year estimates						

Village of Bluffton Population by Race		
Race	Population	% of Total Population
White	3,596	90.6%
Black or African American	98	2.5%
American Indian and Alaska Native	4	0.1%
Asian	37	0.9%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	4	0.1%
Some other race	80	2.0%
Two or more races	148	3.7%
Total	3,967	100.0%
2020: DEC Redistricting Data		

Population & Projections	
Year	Population
1970	2,935
1980	3,310
1990	3,367
2000	3,896
2010	4,125
2020	3,967
2030	4,203
2040	4,438
2050	4,674

Residential Land Use Projection	
Year	Square Footage
2020	1,711,974
2025	1,669,196
2030	1,786,330
2035	1,903,464
2040	2,020,597
2045	2,137,731
2050	2,254,865