

A pathway to healthy growth in Eau Claire

September 2020

The long-term health, sustainability and equity of Eau Claire, like any other community, depend on the policies and regulations that shape future development and transportation investments. As outlined in the City’s Comprehensive Plan, these policies should promote compact development and reinvestment in existing neighborhoods. To that end, this report, produced by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, leverages new and existing data to highlight key areas of opportunity and frame supportive policies to help move the City forward.

Key questions

1. Where in the city can infill development have the greatest impact on people’s health and well-being while supporting a strong local economy?
2. What specific policies can help encourage that form of growth?

Opportunities for urban infill

Our team developed a numeric index to gauge the potential for infill development citywide (Figure 1). This applies mainly to residential and mixed-use projects or neighborhood-serving businesses. Each parcel in the city was scored based on the following criteria (see Technical Appendix for details):

1. Development potential.

Some areas of the city generate much more value per acre than others and certain properties in those areas hold tremendous untapped potential, both for individual property owners and for the Eau Claire’s general economic outlook.

2. Accessibility. Some areas have much better access to jobs, services and the surrounding community, particularly for residents who rely mainly on transit or walking.

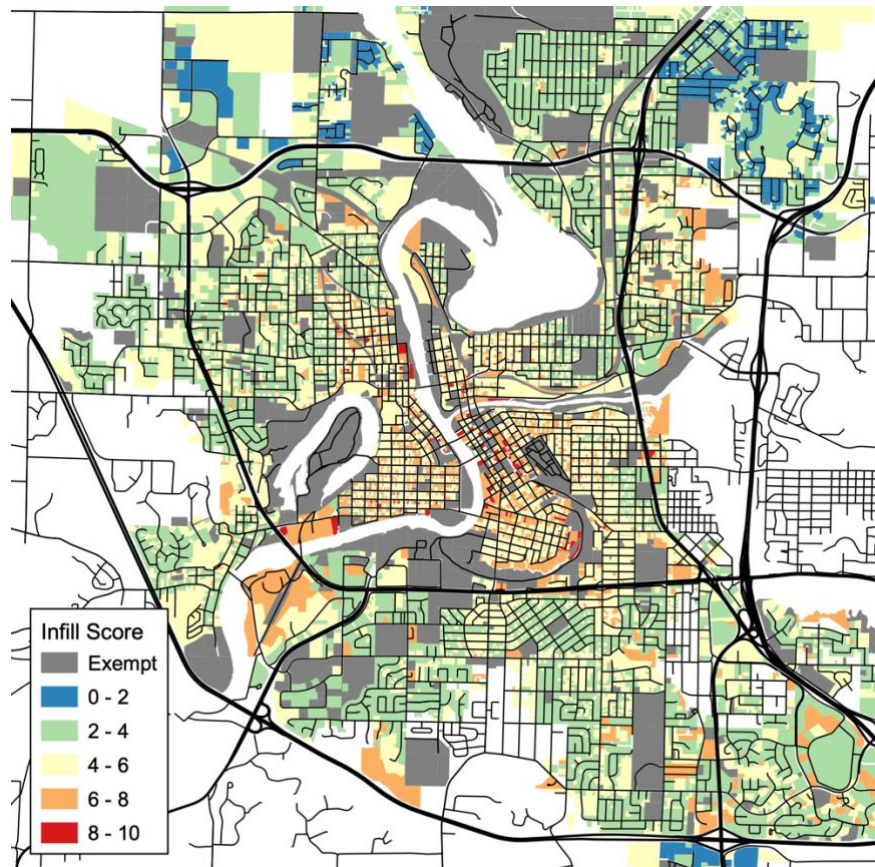


Figure 1. Infill scores throughout Eau Claire

Health in all policies

Better accessibility has direct benefits regarding people’s ability to get to work and accomplish other important daily tasks. But accessibility by modes other than driving has the important added benefit of lowering automobile use, which can help cut traffic, crashes and emissions, while increasing physical activity through walking and biking. Households in the most accessible areas of Eau Claire, for instance, produce around 40 percent less greenhouse gas emissions from transportation than those in the least accessible areas, and they are many times more likely to commute by active transportation (walking, biking or transit) (Figure 2). Encouraging growth in these places and improving accessibility in others can improve health outcomes citywide.

Equitable growth

Infill growth, which has many benefits, can also sometimes facilitate rising property values, which then translate into higher rents and potential displacement, if not properly addressed. Areas with populations that might be at risk, including low-income households and communities of color, are flagged in our data for further consideration (Figure 3). Development in these areas should be sensitive to the needs of existing residents and may need to include affordable housing and essential services to offset and mitigate potential negative impacts.

Consider several projects

The data we compiled for this study sheds light on the potential benefits of infill development and development that improves accessibility overall. Consider three hypothetical projects, for instance: Project A is in one of the highest scoring locations, based on our index; Project B is in a medium scoring location; and Project C is in a low scoring location. Based on the data (Table 1), Project A generates considerably more value per acre, provides much greater accessibility, produces fewer vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and greenhouse gas emissions, encourages more active travel, and incurs lower housing and transportation costs, on average.

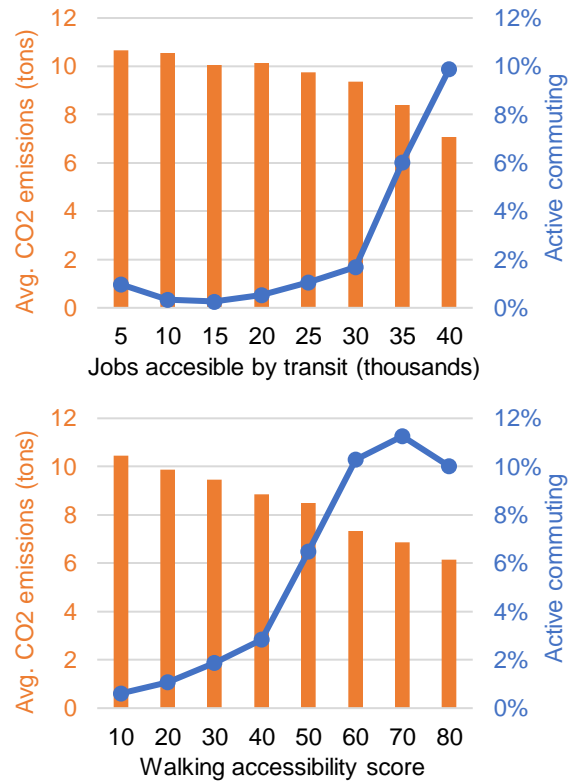


Figure 2. Accessibility and health

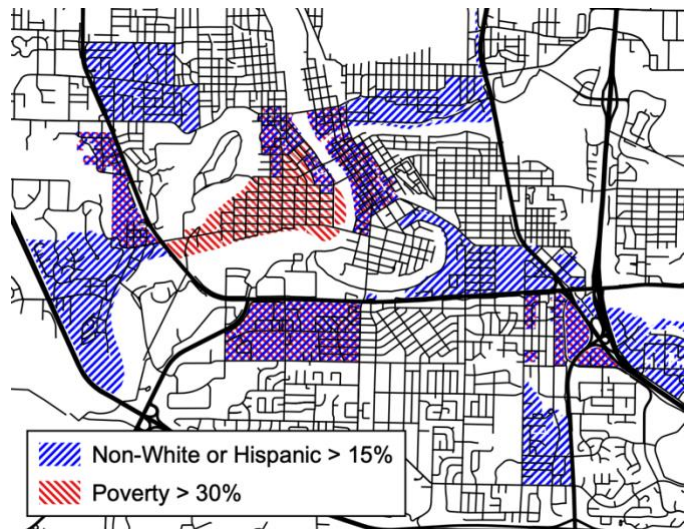


Figure 3. Equity areas in Eau Claire

Table 1. Three hypothetical projects

Typical values from analysis	Project A (score: 8-10)	Project B (score: 4-6)	Project C (score: 0-2)
Value per acre	\$1.14 million	\$660,000	\$450,000
Jobs accessible by transit	37,400	31,600	19,200
Homes accessible by transit	22,000	18,000	8,800
Walking accessibility score (0-100)	65	42	10
Annual VMT per household	16,800	20,700	24,000
Annual tons CO ₂ equivalent per household	6.5	8.6	10.7
Active commuting (walk/bike/bus)	11.5%	5.2%	0.4%
Annual housing costs per household	\$9,300	\$12,100	\$16,000
Annual transportation costs per household	\$10,200	\$12,000	\$14,000

Supportive policies

Land use regulations, including those embedded in zoning district requirements or those in broader rules, such as parking minimums, can make infill physically infeasible or cost prohibitive, even in the most ideal locations. For instance, one-third of parcels scoring 8 or higher using our index are zoned exclusively for one- and two-family development. Our review of the current standards in Eau Claire points to several best practices that could be incorporated into a new overlay district, for instance, or adopted more broadly across Eau Claire, including more outlying developments, to ease responsible development. The City’s existing Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) and Mixed-use Development Overlay District (MXD) embrace some of these principles, but they are limited to much larger development projects or existing commercial areas, respectively, and may not go far enough for encouraging compact infill. As always, care is needed to ensure new development fits reasonably with the existing growth patterns, while also recognizing that infill is an important transitional step toward responsible urban growth.

1. Zoning standards

There are many ways that greater flexibility in zoning regulations can lessen the physical and financial barriers to infill development, while helping to ensure the accessibility and affordability of those projects. These include lower minimum setbacks and parking requirements, for instance, along with allowances for higher densities, taller buildings, and mixed uses within a single site or building (as in MXDs). Developers can also maximize the efficiency of infill development through permitting processes like those currently in place for Planned Developments (PDs). To complement this added flexibility, the City may put additional standards in place to further offset emissions and improve health outcomes, such as requiring solar access and electric vehicle charging infrastructure or bicycle storage and other TDM measures, discussed below.

While many of these standards can be adapted from the City’s existing special districts, some common requirements like minimum open space (15 percent) and maximum lot coverage (35 percent in TNDs) may need to be relaxed further to make projects viable. For small or mid-sized projects, the City may need to consider even higher densities (upwards of 50 units per acre) than

what is currently permitted, and parking requirements may need to be lowered even further or waived in some cases, as described below.

2. Parking regulations

Parking requirements around three spaces per 1,000 square feet or one space per bedroom—common in Eau Claire—often translate to more area for parking than for buildings themselves and can add upwards of \$30,000 per space in construction costs, particularly for structured parking. Much lower standards may be appropriate, especially for affordable housing and in highly accessible places where driving and car ownership tend to be lower. The current flexibility in Eau Claire’s code—shared parking among different types of land uses, off-site parking, and other ad hoc reductions—could be bolstered and expanded upon. Some cities have loosened or eliminated their minimum parking requirements near major transit facilities and in central business districts, while others (e.g., Buffalo, NY, and Hartford, CT) have simply eliminated them citywide.

3. Transportation demand management (TDM)

Infill projects can sometimes elicit concerns about traffic or spillover parking in the surrounding neighborhoods. Therefore, their success often depends on effective TDM, which also lowers automobile use, emissions, and other associated health impacts. TDM programs, which can be prescribed in zoning regulations or in standalone ordinances, typically require developers to limit their traffic impacts through multimodal enhancements such as sidewalks, bicycle accommodations (including lockers and showers), mixed land uses, and transit subsidies. Parking restrictions or fees are also key components of effective programs.¹ Parking spillover issues, which can result from on-site restrictions, can typically be addressed by managing on-street parking through meters and residential parking permits.

Modernizing Mitigation, produced by SSTI with the Mayors Innovation Project at UW-Madison, is a guide for implementing TDM programs in the development review process. SSTI also offers technical assistance in this area.

Our team

This project was led by Saumya Jain, Chris McCahill, and Eric Sundquist at the State Smart Transportation Initiative (SSTI), with support from Katya Spear and Marybeth McGinnis at COWS and Victoria Faust at the Population Health Institute, as part of the Legacy Community Alliance for Health initiative. More information about SSTI is available at www.ssti.us.

¹ Eau Claire allows 25 percent more parking than the minimum requirement for non-residential uses. An effective TDM program may require much lower parking ratios (at or below the current minimums).

Technical appendix

Infill score calculation

The infill score is reported as a value between 0 and 10, calculated as follows:

- Development potential (0 to 5 points; sum of parts below)
 - Relative parcel value (up to 4 points)
 - Undeveloped property (1 point)
- Accessibility (up to 5 points; average of parts below)
 - Jobs accessible by transit (up to 5 points)
 - Homes accessible by transit (up to 5 points)
 - Access to destinations by walking (up to 5 points)

Data sources and methods

Development potential. Development potential is based largely on the assessed value of each parcel, derived from GIS data provided by the City of Eau Claire.²

- **Relative parcel value.** The relative parcel value is the difference between its assessed value per acre and the average value per acre for the surrounding block group.
- **Undeveloped properties.** Any parcel with zero assessed building value was considered “undeveloped.”

Accessibility. These were estimated by our team for a previous study with the City of Eau Claire using the Sugar Access analytical platform. They are measured based on typical conditions during the peak morning period (7 to 9 AM), including road networks with vehicle speeds from HERE Technologies. Transit routes and schedules are derived from publicly available data in General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) format. Population and housing data come from the U.S. Census; jobs data come from the most recent LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) data; and points of interest (POIs) come from HERE Technologies.

- **Jobs accessible by transit.** This indicates the number of jobs accessible from each Census block, including walking access to and from each transit stop. Jobs are weighted depending on their travel time based on a travel time decay function derived from the 2017 National Household Travel Survey (NHTS). For instance, a job 30 minutes away by transit counts as 0.73 jobs, based on the percent of commuters who travel that far, and a job 45 minutes away counts as 0.58 jobs.
- **Homes accessible by transit.** This indicates the number of households accessible from each Census block group, including walking access to and from each transit stop. Households are weighted depending on their travel time based on a travel time decay function derived from the 2017 National Household Travel Survey (NHTS).
- **Walking access score (0-100).** This score describes the variety and number of destinations—including schools, stores, restaurants, parks, and other services—accessible by walking from each Census block. Destinations receive different weights and walking

² Tax exempt parcels were excluded from our analysis mainly because their assessed value is zero (i.e., we cannot properly assess their development potential). However, a number of these parcels are city-owned surface parking lots and properties held by the Redevelopment Authority or religious entities that might be ideal for future development.

segments receive different travel time penalties based on safety and comfort for pedestrians. These parameters are described in the Sugar Access User Guide.

Data from the Center for Neighborhood Technologies. Estimates of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per household, greenhouse gas emissions, and housing and transportation costs are provided by the Center for Neighborhood Technologies (CNT) in their Housing + Transportation (H+T) Index database for each Census block group.

Active commuting (walk/bike/bus). The percent of workers commuting by active modes (walking, biking and transit) are derived from the U.S. Census' American Community Survey (2014-2018) for each Census block group.³

Equity analysis. Equity stakeholder groups (low-income and communities of color) were identified using data from the American Community Survey (2014-2018).³ Thresholds were selected so that roughly 15 percent of Census block groups throughout Eau Claire County would fall into each group. These include areas where more than 15 percent of residents are non-white or Hispanic or more than 30 percent of residents have incomes below federal poverty thresholds. Equity stakeholder groups also include areas where the average combined housing and transportation costs are greater than \$28,000 per year, based on data from CNT's H+T Index.

³ Data from the U.S. Census and the American Community Survey were provided by IPUMS NHGIS at the University of Minnesota, www.nhgis.org.