

# Summary Memo

## Preliminary Results, Round 1 Public Engagement

October 26, 2022

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This document summarizes the preliminary results of the first round of public engagement for Suffolk 2045, a comprehensive plan update for the City of Suffolk, Virginia. Engagement has been conducted between mid-May and late-October, 2022. Input has been gathered in the following ways:

- **Focus group meetings** – Ten focus groups with invited stakeholders were held to discuss key topics to address within the plan.
- **Online engagement events** – Questions about the future and mapping activities were broadly publicized and available online (and provided in paper form in locations around the City).
- **In-person engagement** – In-person opportunities to share thoughts were offered at several popular festivals and events around the City.

The memo includes the following components:

1. Purpose
2. Key Themes
3. Outreach and Publicity
4. Approach
5. Results
6. Participation
7. Next Steps

### 1. Purpose

The City of Suffolk launched the Suffolk 2045 process to update its comprehensive plan in March 2022. The City's last comprehensive plan, Suffolk 2035, was adopted in 2015. One of the key components of the comprehensive plan process is insight from the community. Through the first round of public engagement, multiple opportunities across in-person and online platforms have been provided for individuals interested about the future of the City to help inform the plan. This round of engagement has been designed to solicit big picture ideas from the public in an open-ended way to help shape updates to the plan's recommendations. A second round of engagement will be held to test preliminary ideas for plan updates.

## 2. Key Themes

Throughout the first round of engagement, every comment made at public engagement events was themed and put in a database. Some key themes that have emerged include the following:

- Suffolk's rural / small town feel was identified as one of the City's biggest strengths.
- People see great opportunity in Downtown investment / revitalization.
- Open space and parks are viewed as a significant asset.
- There is a desire for residential and commercial development in the north that is well planned and coordinated.
- The impacts of increased residential development need to be carefully managed.
- Traffic congestion is a challenge that should be proactively addressed through careful planning.
- There is a desire for more entertainment, restaurants, recreation and retail in the City.
- Making sure that growth and development benefits not just some parts of the City—but the City as a whole—is essential.

In addition to these general themes, several geographic areas were identified as important to focus on for the next phase of the work, including:

- Downtown Suffolk – Desire to see increased amenities and services (restaurants, retail, commercial development etc.) to attract people especially younger people and families.
- Southern Suffolk – Interest in retaining rural feel while improving infrastructure.
- Northern Suffolk – Potential to build off recent success through thoughtful approach to where and how new residential and commercial activity is located.
- Waterfront – Opportunity to attract visitors with enhanced recreation and entertainment.
- Villages – Chance to improve attractiveness by focusing on strategic investments and seeking opportunities to improve the quality of public spaces (streets, sidewalks, parks, etc.)
- Corridors – Need to coordinate new development with mobility planning and manage change while capitalizing on economic opportunity.

*"I appreciate the opportunity to express my thoughts on the future of this community!"*

-Engagement participant

### 3. Outreach and Publicity

Extensive outreach and publicity were conducted to spread the word about the opportunity to participate in the plan update. The Team has capitalized on existing networks through community groups, organizations, churches, educational institutions, and local governments for outreach. The Suffolk 2045 Steering Committee and City staff played a key role in spreading the word across the community of the importance of this opportunity. Outreach and publicity included the following:

- A press release was distributed to local media outlets and media stories were published.
- Emails and announcements were sent out to community members outlining ways to participate.
- 5,000 printed rack cards were distributed throughout the City.
- Over 100 groups, organizations or individuals that were invited to the focus group meetings were asked to help spread the word.
- Staff met with community members and promoted the events and online activities.
- Social media was utilized through Facebook posts that were shared by local libraries, community groups and others.
- Staff set up engagement opportunities at eight events throughout the City such as Stars and Stripes, Family Fridays, TGIF Concerts, and the Peanut Festival. Rack cards promoting the online survey, paper survey forms and comment cards were offered.
- Steering Committee members directly reached out to their neighbors and networks.
- Suffolk Public Schools posted flyers on PeachJar, a community electronic news source, to share online engagement activities and events with students and parents.

### 4. Approach

Suffolk 2045's first round of engagement has included multiple parts:

#### **Focus Group Meetings**

Ten in-person focus group meetings that engaged over 60 participants were held to collect targeted input on key topics including housing, transportation and mobility, land use planning, and more. Specific key questions were asked to gauge community input and desired outcomes about these areas.

#### **Online Engagement**

Online engagement included an Ideas for the Future activity with questions about the future of the City of Suffolk along with a mapping activity that asked community members to locate changes within the City in the past seven years and hopes for the future of development. These have been available throughout the duration of the first round of engagement at [www.Suffolk2045.com](http://www.Suffolk2045.com) in both English and Spanish, with hard copy versions

available at libraries and City Hall. Online activities will continue to be open into the early fall.

Ideas for the Future included five questions that got individuals thinking about the assets and opportunities in the City. These questions helped the Team identify areas to focus on that community members in Suffolk found to be most impactful and important to consider as part of the plan update.

The mapping exercise asked participants to identify: 1) changes they have noticed; and 2) what they hope to see in the future. Changes could focus on places where there has been development, where use or activities are different than they were before, or where the look and feel has changed. Hopes for the future highlight areas where individuals would like to see development, different land uses and activities, and improvements in character (quality of the built environment, urban design, public amenities, etc.).

### **In-Person Events**

In-person events allowed the team and staff to interact with over 500 community members. Booths were set up at different festivals and events, such as Stars and Stripes, Family Fridays, TGIF Concerts, and the Peanut Festival, to try and gauge public reception of Suffolk 2045 and its goals. The online activities were also promoted and activities and comment cards were available in paper form.

## **5. Results**

This section summarizes the input collected to date, including information from each in-person focus group and online/paper survey form engagement.

### **Part 1: Focus Group Key Takeaways**

The focus groups discussed major topics to address through the comprehensive plan. Notable comments from each meeting are included below:

#### Industrial and Logistics

- There is a demand for continued growth, but the City has to choose how they want to pursue it.
- Suffolk has an incredible story to share, both within the region and nationally.
- Infrastructure costs like water, sewer, and roads can become barriers for developing new industrial sites.

#### Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

- Suffolk has a diverse identity that should be celebrated by its residents.
- Investments should be balanced among several geographic areas, not just focused where new development is occurring (like Northern Suffolk).
- Supporting the community takes several forms (services, education, transportation,

and financial opportunities).

### Housing

- Growth of industrial areas is what drives many of the housing developments (US 58 and US 460).
- Investment in infrastructure is necessary prior to building new homes or housing developments.
- The types of housing that are needed and desired by residents are changing, and some types are in short supply in the City.
- Residents are looking for nearby amenities and attractions that may not be available in certain areas of the City.

### Commercial and Business Community

- The plan should recognize what residents want and support the anticipated growth from those projections.
- Transportation is a challenge for businesses and residents as roadways become more congested.
- Partnerships and training opportunities that connect the younger generations with local employment opportunities are needed.

### Transportation and Mobility

- Short-sighted developments can severely increase traffic and congestion, so emphasizing more long-term strategies are important to avoid creating more problems.
- Utilizing the rails would provide an opportunity to remove truck traffic but would require investments for improving crossings and other track connections so the road network is not made worse.
- Public transit and other modes like ridesharing can provide some relief from traffic congestion if the region is connected or expanded.
- New trailways are being developed within the region and Suffolk has an opportunity to be part of that regional network.

### Environmental Resources

- The wetlands and open space areas around Suffolk are an asset to the community and add to the diversity of the City and Hampton Roads.
- Water access, parks and other similar elements can become attractions for the community for both residents and visitors.
- The region needs to balance the agricultural community and environmental implications (mitigate potential harm to wetlands, native species, etc.).

### Community Services

- Investments that are equitable are essential to supporting the community through providing resources, accessibility, and collaboration overall.
- Many people would like to see health resources mapped throughout the City to increase accessibility.
- Local community centers can provide support systems (shelter, elderly, mental health) that are available to all neighborhoods.
- Business investment should also include community strengthening to help build programs that support the workforce and their families.
- Lack of transportation can limit access to community services and facilities if congestion increases the time it takes to get to them.
- There is a desire to change the perception of Suffolk and focus on the positive impact of community services rather than the City's problems.

### Land Use Planning for Growth

- Specific growth areas are defined: industrial along US-58 and US-460, residential along Route 10 and within proximity to new industrial.
- The comprehensive plan needs to be specific in where it is directing growth for the City.
- Renewable energy is emerging within the region but planning for this in rural areas is important to recognize and consider.

### Builders (Coastal Virginia Building Industry Association)

- There is a negative public perception in Suffolk about higher density housing and people don't understand how it can be improved through good design.
- There is opportunity for significant new residential development, but it's often hindered by restrictive regulations and/or lack of utilities.
- There is opportunity for development along key corridors and within the villages.

### Agriculture

- The City has seen significant loss of agricultural land since the last plan was adopted due to residential development and the erosion of rural character due to lot splits and seemingly haphazard development.
- Agricultural land should be considered a limited resource and tools and incentives for its preservation should be pursued.
- Development should be concentrated in the growth areas, and there is also opportunity in some of the villages, in an effort to preserve agricultural areas.
- Solar facilities are very undesirable because they negatively impact the rural character and aesthetics of the community and have adverse environmental impacts.

## **Part 2: Online open-ended questions**

The following section includes major themes and ideas provided in response to the following questions:

1. What has most changed about Suffolk over the past seven years?
2. Suffolk has seen significant new development since the last plan was adopted. How do you think this has impacted the City?
3. What are the greatest opportunities for Suffolk looking out over five, ten, or twenty years? What new municipal services, businesses, etc. would you like to see in Suffolk?
4. What are the greatest strengths in Suffolk? What do you like best about your City or your community?
5. Are there topics that are essential to address as part of this update?

Public input has been compiled through an online format and is organized by themes and sub-topics. Themes are the larger organizing structure and include a percentage from the total amount of responses collected. Sub-topics are identified under the themes. Note: Some comments were categorized as relating to more than one theme or sub-topic. Percentages are rounded to the nearest 1%.

### ***What has most changed about Suffolk over the past seven years?***

#### Growth of Residential & Commercial Development (40% of total comments)

- 29% of total comments mentioned the substantial growth of housing in Suffolk over the last seven years; 12% mentioned commercial and business development.
- Many noted that this influx of development has correlated to more traffic congestion and mobility issues throughout the City.
- Population growth coupled with a loss of farmland was also a common theme and correlation between the responses.

#### Increased Traffic Issues & Congestion (20% of total comments)

- Due to recent growth and development, participants pointed out that traffic has recently become worse and needs more adequate planning to reduce congestion pressures.

#### Population Growth (11% of total comments)

- Participants noted the influx of new residents to the City of Suffolk which has caused major changes for development, open spaces and traffic.
- Almost 5% of all comments specifically highlighted Northern Suffolk's growth that has spurred more development overall.

#### Loss of Agricultural/Farmland (8% of total comments)

- Respondents pointed out the large amount of farmland that has been converted and lost as more people have moved into the City.

- 29% of these comments recognized the correlation between the growth in residential development and loss of farmland.

***Suffolk has seen significant new development since the last plan was adopted. How do you think this has impacted the City?***

Enhanced Traffic Issues & Congestion (28% of total comments)

- As previously mentioned, respondents highlighted that some new development has led to severe traffic problems.
- 9% of those comments specifically included that Routes 58, 460, 10 and 17 have the worst congestion in the City and need attention.

Decrease in Quality of Infrastructure (Roadways, Utilities & Broadband, 16% of total comments)

- Participants pointed out the lack of quality infrastructure, stating that there needs to be more adequate infrastructure before new development is built.
  - “Development is fine, but I think it has run ahead of infrastructure, particularly road and school capacities.”
- 47% of infrastructure comments specifically mentioned issues of poor *road* infrastructure throughout the City.

Poor School Facilities & Overall Capacity (11% of total comments)

- With Suffolk’s continued growth has come overcrowding of schools, causing major concern for many respondents.
  - Construction of more school buildings is desired to solve this issue of overcrowding.
- Some participants noted that because of new population growth, traffic issues, and school overcrowding, infrastructure has become outdated and unable to keep pace with new developments and students. This correlation was noted throughout most of the engagement process.

***What are the greatest opportunities for Suffolk looking out over five, ten, or twenty years? What new municipal services, businesses, etc. would you like to see in Suffolk?***

Commercial/Retail Development (18% of total comments)

- More outlet shops, malls, boutiques, restaurants, and local business developments are highly desired by participants.
- Redevelopment of vacant spaces is an opportunity that many highlighted.



#### More Entertainment & Recreational Opportunities (17% of total comments)

- Many comments mentioned a need for more recreational events and venues throughout the City.
- Respondents would like to see activities such as bowling alleys, new restaurants, skating rinks, recreational centers, retail stores, and more.
- 18% of the comments that mentioned entertainment and recreation specifically highlighted the need for more family-oriented recreation options.
  - Similarly, over 30% of comments pertaining to entertainment and recreation specifically highlighted parks and natural space as a key opportunity for Suffolk.

#### Infrastructure Improvements (12% of total comments)

- Infrastructure concerns were a recurring theme throughout the engagement process.
- Of those comments pertaining to infrastructure improvements, over 25% specifically highlighted internet/broadband as a major issue.
  - Respondents would like to see an emphasis on citywide broadband connectivity, faster internet speeds, and access for *all* areas of Suffolk.
- The rising cost of water utilities pertained to about 13% of infrastructure comments.

#### ***What are the greatest strengths in Suffolk? What do you like best about the City or your community?***

#### Maintaining the Rural/Small Town Feel (30% of total comments)

- Respondents love the rural and small-town life that they have in Suffolk.
- Many are afraid that overdevelopment will make the City overpopulated, loud and undesirable.
- 17% of total responses mentioned that Suffolk's greatest strength is the community, family-like connection in the City due to its smaller-town feel.

#### Access to Open Space & Parks (16% of total comments)

- Suffolk's access to natural space, parks, and farmland is highly valued by participants.

#### Location & Connectivity (13% of total comments)

- Suffolk's proximity to urban centers including Chesapeake, Norfolk and Virginia Beach were mentioned to be a key asset.
  - "It provides a country life within a convenient distance of other major cities."
- About 24% of location comments highlighted the mix of urban, suburban, and rural characteristics present in Suffolk.

### ***Are there topics that are essential to address as part of this update?***

#### Infrastructure (17% of total comments)

- Many participants noted the declining quality of infrastructure from the increased use and demand for roads from recent population growth.
- Improving /enhancing infrastructure before approving or building new developments to decrease congestion and other issues was one of the most consistent themes throughout the process.
  - “The lack of infrastructure to keep up with the growing population. As more families have moved in, there should have been more funds put towards the drainage system and broadband internet.”

#### Traffic & Congestion (14% of total comments)

- Congestion, specifically on routes 10 and 58, was mentioned in about 20% of comments pertaining to traffic.

#### Overdevelopment (14% of total comments)

- General overdevelopment of housing and businesses such as car washes and warehouses were mentioned to be a major issue within the City that correlate to issues like traffic congestion and lack of recreational opportunities.
- Overdevelopment resulting in a loss of farmland was also noted to be a concern for many respondents.

#### School Facilities & Capacity (13% of total comments)

- Participants strongly agree that Suffolk’s schools and school facilities need funding, planning, and investment overall to ease issues of overcrowding caused by rapid development.

### **Part 3: Mapping Suffolk**

Below is a summary of key themes that have emerged from mapping activities online or via paper survey forms.

Participants were asked to map changes they have noticed, and what they would like to see in the future. Again, changes could focus on places where there has been development, where use or activities are different, or where places where the look and feel has changed. Hopes for the future highlight areas where individuals would like to see development, different land uses and activities, and improvements in character.

A map capturing this input can be found at [suffolk2045.org/roundonecompositemap/](https://suffolk2045.org/roundonecompositemap/).

### ***Changes you have noticed:***

#### 1. Downtown Suffolk

- Respondents noted that the downtown area has seen a lot of growth and development of new areas such as parks and commercial growth.
- Public safety is a concern for citizens, as many highlighted the increase in crime.

#### 2. Northern Suffolk

- More than 19% of total responses mentioned the recent growth of Northern Suffolk, including housing, retail, dining and more.
- Due to the high concentration of new businesses and housing in the Northern part of Suffolk, people would like to see more evenly dispersed development.

#### 3. Harbour View

- Many mentioned the abundant commercial and retail development that the Harbour View area has experienced in the past couple of years.

#### 4. Godwin Boulevard

- 9% of total mapping comments stated that this section of the City has seen a high percentage of new housing developments including many multifamily unit apartments.
- Increased traffic and congestion were largely noted because of the amount of new residential developments.

#### 5. Routes 10, 17 & 58

- Almost 20% of all comments pertained to changes and issues present within routes 10, 17 & 58.
- Respondents want to see traffic congestion relief along these roads, which would increase driving safety. The increase in high-density apartment developments along these roads were repeatedly noted as a cause for concern.

### ***What you hope to see in the future:***

#### 1. Downtown Suffolk

- Although Suffolk's downtown has seen recent growth and development, residents would like to expand more on this and make the area a more dynamic place (more amenities, retail, etc.).
- 22% of comments pertaining to downtown highlighted the need for this area to include more recreational opportunities for younger community members and families.

- Respondents would like to see more commercial and retail development that encourages small business expansion and growth.

## 2. Southern Suffolk

- Southern Suffolk is an area that many would like to see remain rural amidst development throughout the City.
- Some noted a need for infrastructure improvements in this area.

## 3. Waterfront

- Create a grand vision to boost tourism in Suffolk by utilizing the waterfront areas.
- Participants would like this area to be revitalized and used as a hub of recreation and entertainment opportunities for all.

## 4. Whaleyville

- Many respondents would like to sustain the agricultural farmland and feel of this area.

## 6. Participation

All participants' comments have been databased and those who filled out the online activities were asked to complete an exit questionnaire about their experience and themselves. The following insight is based on data collected and responses to the questionnaire as of the date of this summary report.

### **Key takeaways regarding participation and satisfaction**

- There have been over 10,400 webpage views from approximately 4,500 unique visitors during the engagement period.
- The in-person focus groups engaged over 60 people in ten sessions.
- Approximately 800 people have responded to the survey questions.
- Over 4,200 unique comments have been collected.
- More than 250 locations within the City have been identified through in-person workshops and the online mapping activity.
- Over 3,000 people have interacted with Staff at in-person events.
- 45% of individuals heard about Suffolk 2045 through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; the second most common way people heard was word-of-mouth (18%).
- Females, individuals identifying as White/Caucasian, and higher educated people were over-represented relative to Suffolk's overall population. The team will work to address discrepancies in participation of demographic groups to the extent possible in the next round of engagement.

## 7. Next Steps

Following this public input opportunity, community insight will be analyzed to inform the plan's preliminary recommendations on a range of topics, including community character and land use, economic development, housing, transportation, environmental resources, and community facilities and services. These will then be tested and available for feedback within the second round of public engagement. Learnings from this first round of engagement regarding outreach, publicity and engagement formats will be considered in designing the second round.

| *"I'm proud to be part of the Suffolk community"*

-Engagement participant