PEKIN
ILLINOIS
THIS
PLACE
MATTERS
Introduction

*This Place Matters* is the slogan of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The organization’s mission is to help people protect, enhance, and enjoy the places that matter to them - their communities. The goal of their campaign is not solely to preserve buildings, but rather to move toward a future full of more meaningful, sustainable communities that have the power to inspire people to protect their history.

Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to planning, design, and management of public spaces. It capitalizes on a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential by creating good public spaces that promote people’s health, happiness, and well being.* The intention of this document is to provide a foundation on which Pekin, Illinois can strengthen its community and provide a greater sense of place for all of its citizens.

People seem to know great places when they see them. It may be an instinctive human trait to feel when a place is worthy of greatness. The question is how do they become great? The decisions cities and its citizens make significantly influence the quality of the neighborhoods, streets, and public spaces. There are many elements that are factored into whether people view a certain place as great.

Unfortunately, there is not a specific checklist of items that make a city great. Each and every city is unique and has its own opportunities in forming a great place. Creating a firm foundation on which Pekin can grow is the initial step. The steps that are highlighted in this document are:

- Historic Preservation
- Complete Streets
- Removing Unnecessary Obstacles
- Innovation From Within
- Standards Of Excellence

This document is intended to be used as a living, breathing document that is adaptable to future change. Previously, the way cities were planned were very short-sided and with a narrow focus. In order to succeed to its fullest potential Pekin must change the way it looks at itself. There must be a vision to see the entire city as a whole as opposed to working feverously on isolated pieces of the whole without the understanding of how complex a city organism is.

*Project for Public Spaces – www.pps.org*
The preservation of buildings and spaces is not the job of a few enlightened residents; rather, it is the responsibility of the community as a whole. A city with a rich heritage and a city that continues to preserve itself is a stronger city because of it. Dating back to 1824, Pekin is incredibly wealthy with history. From the settlement originally known as “Town Site,” the roots of the city are still present in some areas.

As with most American cities that have been around for over 188 years, Pekin has grown and adapted through an industrial revolution, a depression, two World Wars, and the advent of suburban sprawl. With the combination of affordable automobile use and the rise of American affluence after World War II, it became easier to decentralize our cities. The unintended consequence is that it has left many items connecting us to our past in jeopardy. It has also ravaged our sense of place by disbursing our elements of economic diversity all over the city; thus, making them only reachable by automobile.

The city of Pekin has a depleted building stock of historic buildings and homes, but nevertheless, they are still present and should be at the forefront of preservation attempts. There have been many people who have made Pekin home or passed through the city throughout the years. There is a chance to celebrate their lives and the places in which they lived. Brick paved streets throughout the city continue to crumble. These streets should be seen as a unique opportunity to make neighborhoods more defined by adding character to the city.

Maintaining a link to our history provides authenticity to Pekin. If the trend of demolishing our place to build for speculative gain further away continues, residents will have a culture devoid of respect for the
city. A sense of helplessness is deeply sewn into the subconscious of the community. If attempts to preserve are not taken, the thought that place is meaningless is reinforced. The governing bodies of Pekin need to lead by example and demonstrate they are willing to reinvest in the most important place of all – what is already there.

Course of Action

1. Reestablish the Historic Preservation Commission. A strong organization to oversee the preservation of a city’s history is needed – preservation will not just happen organically.

2. Uncover and restore the brick streets that are in many older neighborhoods. While bricks cost more than asphalt to install, their longevity makes them more economical in the long run. An easy way to increase property values, sense of neighborhood place, and decrease long term obligations. (example cities - Champaign, IL & Rock Island, IL)

3. Install historic way-finding markers to designate historic neighborhoods and buildings. Without notifying the public that a place is historic, they will not know. These markers are especially useful for tourists and visitors to Pekin.

4. Begin planning for a new Tazewell County Museum along the riverfront. The current museum is underserved and in an undesirable location. The new museum will be a fully interactive connection with the past and the future of Pekin. It will be an excellent generator of diversity in a much depressed area.

5. Create an educational plan to implement in the schools that will exemplify the history of the student’s own community. The students will be more apt to understand and preserve their places when they become adults.
Complete Streets

Pekin was constructed at a time long before the invention of the automobile. The street network that was established early on allows for very good connectivity with surrounding areas. In areas near the core of downtown, it is still feasible to reach basic needs within a 5 minute (or quarter mile) walk. This is the key to restoring economic activity. The abundance and strength of the parks and recreation department provides an easy relationship to the rest of the city. Pekin has the possibility to become fully integrated as an outdoor city - unlike its neighboring cities. This gives Pekin a strategic advantage.

The need of traffic engineers to make traffic move more rapidly has cost the city dearly. Converting neighborhood and main thoroughfares into one-way passages has reduced the amount of time that one is willing to spend in an area. It has also decreased the safety of these streets by allowing automobiles to travel at higher speeds. The effect the one-way streets have on the city of Pekin can be seen around the downtown. Allowing motorists to speed through an area has reduced the likelihood that they will actually interact in the area. This has affected local commerce by displacing it further away from the center of the city and where a motorist has a chance to retain what they see.

In many cases, the street network of Pekin provides a blank canvas. More softening touches are needed to ease the hard, uninviting places they make. Sidewalk improvements and bike paths can be integrated with future street planning. When designing streets, it is imperative to design them with humans in mind, not just automobiles. Americans pay top dollar to visit cities with traditional street networks. Such examples include: Galena, Illinois, Greenville, South Carolina, and Alexandria, Virginia. To create a lively and vibrant environment, careful steps must be taken to not isolate the intended user – humans.
A continued dependence on motor vehicles has proven to be an unsustainable form of growth. Sprawling further and further away from a centralized point lessens a citizen’s ability to use alternative means of transportation. It not only takes a financial toll on the citizens to use these means, but it also takes a toll on the health of the individual. Automobile use will continue to cause citizens to be disconnected and feel isolated from their civic life. This will have adverse effects on how they view the city.

Course of Action

1. Institute the policies set forth by the National Complete Streets Coalition.* Doing this will ensure that the fundamentals of a more livable community with the consideration of all users are implemented in the future.

2. Restore walkability in neighborhoods where sidewalks and curbs have deteriorated. Ensure all sidewalks are easy to navigate by foot and are handicap accessible. Reinstate neighborhood streets back to two-way traffic patterns to reduce the speed at which automobiles travel in residential areas.

3. Convert the south-most lane of Margaret Street and the north-most lane of Ann Eliza to allow for more sidewalk space and bike lane usage downtown. Reducing the ability to travel unencumbered through downtown will increase usage of sidewalks and invite people to experience the place of downtown.

4. South Route 29 has an excellent opportunity to upgrade its sidewalks as well as introduce bike lanes. This would allow the industrial park and southern neighborhoods to connect to the rest of the city without the use of automobiles.

5. Improve the streetscape of Derby Street. The street width is currently able to accommodate the addition of bike lanes on both sides of the street. Expanding the sidewalks and using trees and planters will soften its aesthetic while also protecting pedestrians from automobile traffic.

* National Complete Streets Coalition – www.completestreets.org
Removing Unnecessary Obstacles

There are still a wealth of buildings, spaces, and natural resources available in Pekin. There is an equal amount of educated and trained specialists working in departments meant to make Pekin a better place. The core of the city will remain near the riverfront, where settlers originally laid the groundwork for the city. It is no coincidence that the future economic growth of the city will also take place near the core of the city. The strong assets that Pekin boasts are the Illinois River to the west, a well-situated downtown and street grid, top tier parks located amongst neighborhoods, and fertile farmland to the east.

Throughout the twentieth century, single-use zoning has played a pivotal role in shaping communities across America. Pekin’s evolution since this type of zoning was implemented has changed the landscape of the city. Lack of density, reduced building standards, land usage with limited economic diversity, and a preoccupation with automobiles has left little that resembles place behind. These short-sighted, rigid zoning laws that were meant to protect people have produced more problems than they have solved. In turn, the attempt to regulate the built environment has lacked any civic art refinements. As the modernist style development of Pekin has transpired, it has left the citizens with little to no choice but to be auto-dependent.

The decision-makers of Pekin have the ability to approach the same (old) issues with a new and innovative perspective. There are decades of knowledge of how a city and its citizens interact and there are many lessons to learn from the past. The crucial factor is that this information must be used and not admired from afar. In order to improve the sense of place and encourage growth from within, Pekin must not be afraid to challenge broad and restrictive zoning laws.

Continuing down the path of least resistance has brought many local economies to a slow-down. An intelligently designed town can easily provide access to the needs and wishes of people in everyday life by allowing for public transit, walking, and biking. The models for these places already exist: London, Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Prague, Munich, Oxford, Perugia, and Zurich.* The goal is not to limit future developments or remove all automobiles from the road. However, overcoming the obstacles that are presented by zoning laws and regulations will increase redevelopment, increase the infill of existing vacancies, and reduce the amount of driving that needs to take place. Without progressing in this matter, Pekin’s citizens stand to be continually disappointed with the built environment surrounding them since it is not built with them in mind.

*James Kunstler – Home From Nowhere pg. 79
Course of Action

1. Abolish the current zoning laws and regulations. Amending them only allows for more confusion of an already very strenuous process.

2. Adapt the Traditional Neighborhood Development principles set forth by the Congress for the New Urbanism which promote mixed-use development and promote sustainability. They are widely accepted principles presented in a user-friendly handbook that reduces having to reinvent the wheel and waste resources in the process.

3. Encourage the Economic Development Council to promote the new way of developing Pekin. Without such demanding procedures to go through and a more flexible system in place, developers who previously turned down opportunities in Pekin would consider it an ideal place to do business.

4. Reinforce the ease of building and investing in the city by advancing computer technology to expedite the process. User-friendly interfaces will allow department staff to utilize their time more efficiently.

5. Reduce the procedures in place and increase incentives to rehabilitate older buildings. This will enable current property owners and/or future property owners to not have to fight the battles usually only won by the wealthiest developers. Rehabilitation reinforces preservation and in doing so, leads to more sustainable land usage.
Innovation From Within

Talent is the driver of a city’s success. Pekin has the ability to use its stock of old buildings as a catalyst for innovation. Urban historian and community activist Jane Jacobs wrote, “Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings.”* The building blocks for future growth and retention of its best talent are in place - they just need to be utilized. Recent local economic gains have come from long-standing companies. This is an indicator that successes are more prone to happen from inside the city of Pekin than they are from trying to lure a nationally-operated chain to the city. The strength of Pekin lies in growing its own talent from within.

As it currently stands, there are many stringent laws and rules in place that prohibit entrepreneurs from growing or reaching their fullest potential. Additionally, the demolition of older buildings leaves newer, higher cost buildings in its wake. Without lower costs of entry into the marketplace, the possibility of smaller, local entrepreneurs appearing is less likely.

The Michigan Municipal League has shown that 65 percent of college-educated young people look first, for an attractive place to live, and second, for a job. An investment in the place of Pekin today is an investment in its future. It is not only more probable that current students and recent college graduates would remain in Pekin, but that Pekin would also be able to draw in new citizens from outside the city.

With such high barriers of entry into the Pekin business market, it will be forced to rely heavily on nationally-operated companies or very well-subsidized organizations that have the ability to locate there. Without a strong sense of place there will be trouble attracting new talent from outside the city. Moreover, without innovative new enterprises locating in Pekin, it stands to lose its own talent from within.

* Jane Jacobs, The Death And Life Of Great American Cities pg. 188.
Course of Action

1. Examine the feasibility of lowering existing restrictions that would allow for more commerce to take place. Specific laws pertaining to Tazewell County and the City of Pekin need to be analyzed to determine if more opportunities could be present if barriers did not exist.

2. Explore new financial instruments to promote business start-ups and redevelopment of existing locations. Working collaboratively with any number of banks will help in the collaboration and reduction of risk to fund new ideas.

3. Establishing a local entrepreneurial educational center will allow for anyone to become more informed on the steps needed to create their product or service in Pekin. A preferable location is the Pekin Area Chamber of Commerce or nearby to utilize its business resources.

4. Promote the use of internships within all businesses and organizations in Pekin. Young adults gain much needed experience and training from these programs. With this real-world experience and training, talent levels rise. Ideally, internships provide those businesses and organizations with an increased chance of finding a more qualified candidate when openings arise within their company. Also increasing is the retention of talent in Pekin.

5. Create a database of existing buildings - either vacant or for sale/lease - with a list of their attributes and costs needed to make information more transparent to developers and entrepreneurs. This helps on the front-end and on the back-end of the transaction.
Standards Of Excellence

Many wonderful examples of a higher, well-executed standard of excellence exist in places of Pekin. These examples should be noted as items to preserve and to also draw from. Unless a standard is imposed, the city will not get what it desires from neither the citizens of Pekin, nor the place it has become. Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, “We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us.” Fortunately, a higher standard of excellence is relatively easy to obtain by increasing the cumulative education, effort, and execution.

A disposable mindset has led cities across America to not invest in place, and Pekin is no different. A culture that is not concerned with the little details is bound to operate below its potential. Following suit with a single-use zoning model of modernist style development has manifested a consensus that what has been left behind is replaceable. Character and charm are replaced by childish and self-destructive tendencies. A disconnect has slowly formed between the citizens of Pekin and the place it has become. Residential and commercial buildings that are not at a human scale, that are set back from the street, and that are only reachable by automobile cause people to become withdrawn from their own environments.

Beauty can be reintroduced in areas where creativity was previously lacking. At times when the nation had less financial means, it still managed to construct places of much more significance. This disproves the fact that a city has to be at its financial apex before well-designed places and buildings can be made. Although the erosion of the place that is Pekin, and subsequently, the culture of Pekin, happened gradually, it can begin to regain what was lost by looking inward.
If the place of Pekin is perceived by its own residents as something to not care about, then that learned human behavior will guide them on a daily basis. Without establishing a standard of excellence, conditions will deteriorate exponentially. Those settings that do not have a precedent of higher standards or any incentive to act otherwise, will continue to breed inferior quality. If a city becomes dull and inconvenient, the place itself becomes not worth celebrating. Elevating standards translates into better quality of life for all of Pekin’s residents.

**Course of Action**

1. Critically and objectively determine what city assets should be preserved and what liabilities can be improved. Demolition is at no point an option - new ways to advance the area must be considered.

2. Maintain all public spaces with the utmost precision. A first impression is often how a city is remembered. It is how visitors, potential residents, developers, and businesses judge the city. Because of this, attention to detail must be given to these matters. This attention to detail signifies to the residents of Pekin that this must be an important place and must be taken care of as such.

3. Adoption of an urban code to regulate street design, lot sizes, buildings, types, and built-to-lines. Simultaneously, adopting an architectural code that regulates materials, roof pitches, dormers, porches, and windows.

4. Cooperate with absentee owners of residential and commercial properties to reduce the incidence of blight or vacancies. It can no longer be excusable to tolerate what lowers the common good for all. Site valuation tax methodology may be considered to possibly incentivize unwilling property owners.

5. Encourage the general public to participate in ways to beautify their surroundings. Spruce Up Pekin is been a good start but constant reinforcement must take place the entire year. A more dedicated and concentrated effort will yield positive results in restoring the sense of place for years to come.
The future of Pekin and the place it will be in years to come depends on the recognition of how all of its parts work together to make the city the complex organism that it is. Reinvesting in the place of Pekin is a long-term investment. The short-term gains that will be realized by accomplishing a better sense of place are not to be taken lightly. However, these gains will not reflect that job of investing in them is over. Continued investments in the items outlined in this document ensure that a better sense of place will be achieved.

The term place may be a very broad term, but it is a very real, tangible, and influential environment that humans interact with. People remember cities as “good places” or “bad places.” In some cases, places are forgotten. These are uninspiring cities that offer nothing for people to remember. Uniqueness and authenticity show that a city is a genuine place.

By providing a direct connection to the linkage of Pekin’s past, the current generations of residents will continue building atop the layers of social fabric. Making the streets of Pekin a more convenient and friendly environment to walking and biking will reduce the heavy reliance on automobile use in the future. In turn, the citizens will be more in touch with their surroundings and will be able to use more sustainable land use patterns. Adopting a new set of principles to guide new developments will promote higher density and reuse of currently existing structures. Removing barriers and obstacles needed for growth will enable a new wave of innovations within Pekin. These new innovative measures implemented around town and the attention to detail that is established will lead to a higher standard of excellence. A long-lasting example will be set for future generations to follow.

This document is meant to be used as a tool to provide the groundwork for change. It is not meant to read as a Comprehensive Plan nor does it contain the renderings that a Development Plan would. As is characteristic of every great place, the people that make up the city will be the true catalysts of positive change. They will be the ones to decide on what should go where and how it should look. Pekin has a unique opportunity presented before it. It is time to seize this opportunity and show that **This Place Matters.**