

# Chapter 3. Community Character

Community character is often considered one of the most valuable assets that a town or city can have. Community character is generally determined by the people, events, landmarks, and other elements that make a place unique. These various aspects create a place that residents love to inhabit and draws tourists from around the country. While there is no specific formula that a town must follow to create or enhance its community character there are always a variety of strategies that can be pursued regardless of a towns size or other characteristics.

Creating a unique identity for the community is of utmost importance in an age where suburbanization has produced towns that look incredibly similar, with shopping malls, big box stores, and unadorned condominiums. Places that break this trend often see increases in outside capital, tourism, and quality of life for existing residents.

Through the input process, many residents mentioned that they would like to maintain Mechanicsville’s small-town character as well as leverage its existing cultural assets to create a unique sense of the place for the community. The goal of this chapter is to identify opportunities and build on the community’s unique characteristics so that clear goals can be made in pursuit of these ends.

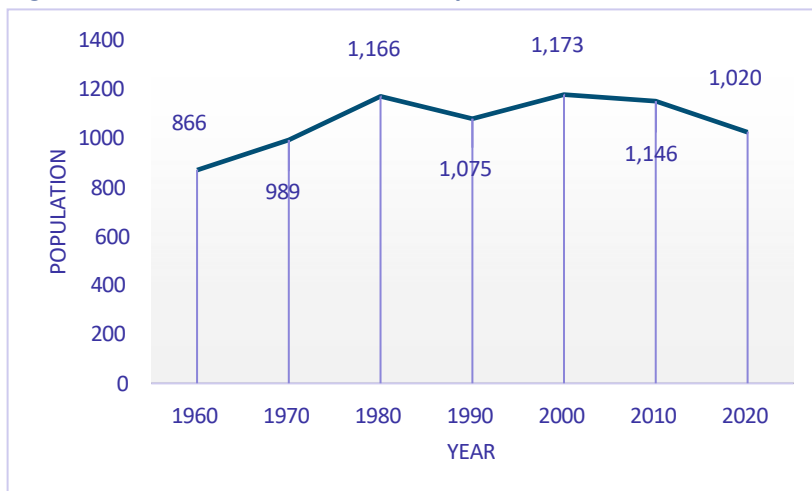
## Population Demographics

A key aspect in understanding a city is understanding the people that inhabit it. This broad field of analysis is called demography which is the statistical study of human populations. Analysis of demographic information and understanding trends revealed by this information is crucial when trying to understand the community and planning for its future needs.

## Population

Total population is one of the most important pieces of demographic information for a city. A basic count of people helps city leaders administer resources and strategically plan for the future, particularly in its delivery of services and infrastructure.

**Figure 1. Mechanicsville Historical Population 1960-2020**



*Source: US Census Bureau, Decennial 1960-2020*

Since 1960, Mechanicsville’s population has remained relatively stable, with its population peaking in the year 2000 at 1,173. It should be noted however, that the most recent census numbers have recorded a significant downward trend in population, mitigating this issue is a crucial goal in the planning process. All things considered, we can see these trends in the context of Mechanicsville’s history in Figure 1 and despite this recent downward trend the city is still at a net positive since 1960.

A lack of population growth is not an issue that is unique to Mechanicsville, rather it is a common problem facing many small communities across the nation. Across the United States we are seeing population consolidate in the larger metropolitan areas. Regionally, this consolidation is occurring in the Cedar Rapids, Dubuque, Quad Cities, and Iowa City metropolitan areas.

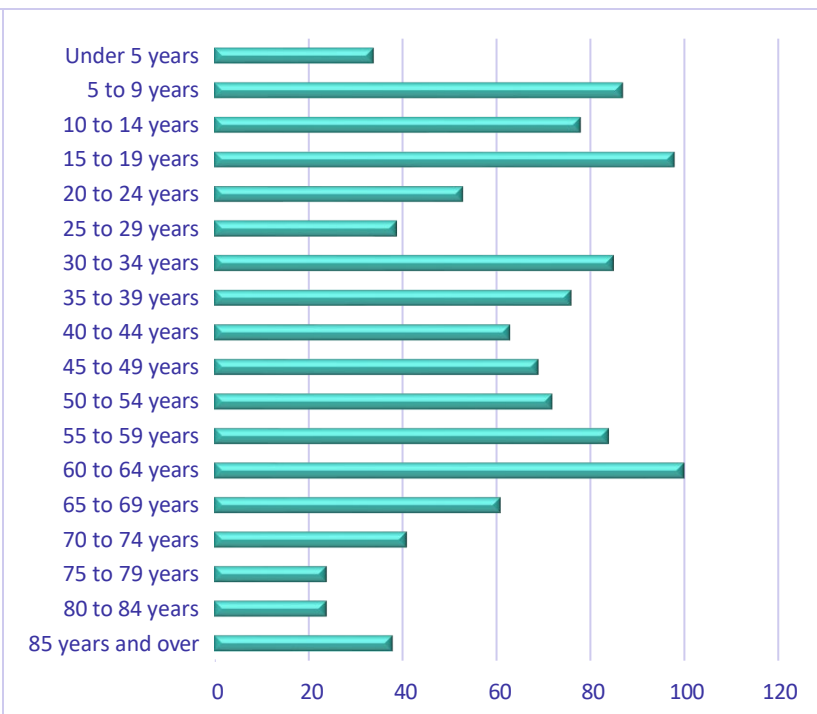
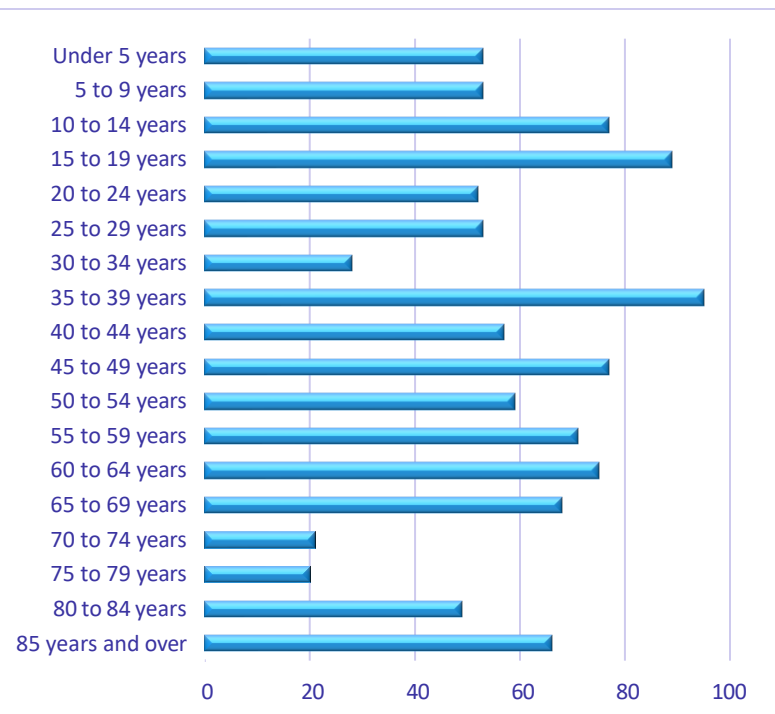
Population growth is a crucial step towards economic and social stability within a community. Population growth leads to increased demand for housing and local businesses which can help attract private capital. This generally leads to more amenities and a higher quality of life as the increased tax base give the local government more resources to deliver services and make improvements to infrastructure.

## Age

According to U.S. census estimates, Mechanicsville’s population has been growing younger on average, which is a positive trend. The 2010-2014 estimates generated by the American Community Survey shows a median

**Figure 2. 2010-2014 Estimated Age**

**Figure 3. 2015-2019 Estimated Age**



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age of 43.1, and the 2015-2019 estimates resulted in a median age of 41.3 in Mechanicsville. This could be due to a number of factors, but since there is also a decrease in total population in this time period, this trend could be explained by the elderly population moving away to be closer to amenities/services/family that are located in the Cedar Rapids metropolitan area.

The large population between the ages 55 and 73 in the 2019 estimates, and the age group between 50 and 68 in the 2014 estimates represents the Baby Boomer generation. This large demographic group is going to be in high demand of medical services and other amenities, and this may trigger a dramatic decline in population as they move to be closer to these services.

## **Population Trends**

As previously indicated, these demographic estimates play a large role in constructing long-term development strategies, particularly in regards to attraction and expansion. While there is a positive trend of an increasingly young population this comes with the potential of losing a large, aging segment of the city's population. That being said there is always opportunities for a community to grow based on a steady inward-migration.

## **Population Impacts on Housing**

Population trends affect housing trends in a number of ways, it can impact household size, overall demand, and housing types. Older populations may not want or cannot utilize large single-family homes. They may instead opt for more accessible single floor plans or even apartments where maintenance needs are largely covered by a landlord. The large demographic between 20 and 34 years of age may also need small starter homes or apartments before they start families in a large residence. It is crucial for these housing needs to be addressed so that residents of all stages of life have housing options that suit their needs so that population loss does not occur.

## **Quality of Life**

While housing is a good addition to a complete development strategy, it should not be the sole focus of a plan. People often make decisions on where they are to live based on less tangible things such as quality of life or the general feeling of a community. The most common reason people move is simply where they work, but people often commute in excess of 45 minutes if they feel that a particular town has a high quality of life.

Things that improve the quality of life include a unique town identity, engaging community programs, amenities, well-kept streets and houses, and great public spaces, among other qualities. These qualities help a community differentiate itself from other towns and may increase attraction and retention of residents. The other positive aspect is that many of these qualities can be improved at a very low cost to the city and its residents.

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## Active Resident Recruitment

In addition to incremental improvements, cities can also engage in “active resident recruitment”. This strategy lets cities take a more aggressive marketing approach in engaging with potential residents. These programs are often associated with business recruitment, but similar strategies of direct marketing can be utilized by cities to help promote their town and highlight the aspects that set it apart from other communities. University of Minnesota Extension has conducted on rural migration and resident recruitment. The researchers have compiled a list of resident recruitment strategies implemented by various communities.

- Working with local community organizations like the community club or other groups to involve new residents and match up their talents and passions with community needs.
- Organizing volunteers to welcome new people to the community. This could be as simple as taking new residents out to lunch as a way to welcome them to the community and learn about their interests and talents
- Building housing for the elderly to free up single-family homes, which would then be matched with young families moving to the community.
- Offering newcomers free passes to municipal recreation facilities, discounts from local merchants, and several months' free utility service.
- Courting alumni at school reunions by informing them of retiring businesses and homes for sale.
- Use marketing to promote the positive aspects of living in a small community like Mechanicsville vs. living in a larger city.
- Ensure that high-quality childcare opportunities are available and affordable to all residents.

Please visit University of Minnesota extension at <https://extension.umn.edu/community-development> for more information.

## Community Events and Organizations

Throughout the year Mechanicsville hosts events that are attended by many community residents and visitors. These community events not only improve the quality of life for residents, and helps bring money into local businesses. Most events held in Mechanicsville are organized by community groups and volunteers.

### Memorial Day

The Mechanicsville American Legion and Auxiliary conduct a number of events on the week of Memorial Day. These include laying poppies at the cemetery to honor deceased soldiers, a flag ceremony, and a community program held at the Mechanicsville cemetery. This event is concluded by a ceremony where the flags are taken down.

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## Trunk or Treat

During Halloween the neighboring cities of Mechanicsville, Stanwood, and Clarence put together a trunk or treat event that is sponsored by each city and the Main Street Iowa program. In each town residents will all park in one location and decorate their cars with Halloween themed items. Kids will dress up in their Halloween costumes and visit each car which will provide candy and other Halloween goodies.

## Lions Club July 4<sup>th</sup> Pork Chop Lunch

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, the Mechanicsville Lions club organizes a pork chop lunch for the community. This event accompanies other July 4<sup>th</sup> events that occur in Mechanicsville and surrounding towns.

## Mechanicsville Fire & Ambulance Volunteers/Fireworks at Dusk

The Mechanicsville fire and ambulance volunteers host a number of fundraising events throughout the year and the funds go towards a firework display on July 4<sup>th</sup>. This event relies solely on community donations which are largely generated through events like the Mechanicsville Fire and Ambulance volunteers pancake breakfast; where the volunteers host a pancake breakfast for the community, and all profits go towards the firework show in July.

## Bingo

Bingo is a regularly scheduled event that is popular with many residents in Mechanicsville. It is held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday at the senior dining center. Before bingo begins, there is a community meal at 5:30.

## Holiday Tree Lighting Ceremony

In November, 2021 the community decided to rekindle an old tradition of lighting up a Christmas tree on December 5<sup>th</sup> at the Memorial Park. Festivities before the tree lighting included, cookies, caroling, holiday drinks at a local restaurant, family photos, and a letter drop off to Santa.

## Hometown Pride - Keep Iowa Beautiful Committee

The KIB program awarded \$125,000 to 14 communities Mechanicsville and surrounding communities in 2021. The Hometown Pride – KIB committee has 14 members and meets at the American Legion Hall. This citizen led committee is focusing on a number of beautification projects around Mechanicsville. These projects include: Replacing Park equipment, creating a parks master plan, fixing park drainage issues, a new pavilion, connecting trails to parks, and increased signage around town. So far, the projects that the committee has helped complete include park restoration projects, cleanup events, and movies in the park.

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## Churches

Religious organizations are an important part of the Mechanicsville community. The city is home to St. Mary's Catholic Church, First United Methodist Mechanicsville, Living Hope Bible Church and the Presbyterian Church.

## Library

The Mechanicsville public library located on 218 E. First Street has continued to have an incredibly positive impact on the community, and numerous residents cite the library's programs as being especially beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic. The library offers educational programs for all ages, career resources, game nights, and many other programs throughout the year.

## Parks and Recreation

Mechanicsville has always taken pride in providing recreational opportunities for the community. The City of Mechanicsville maintains three parks in the city. The first is a small park located off of the Lincoln Highway by the water tower called East End Park. This East End Park has a small covered pavilion, two benches, a merry-go-round, swings, slide, jungle gym, and a balance beam. The second park that Mechanicsville has is the Cruces Park, this is the largest park in the city; Cruces Park has a large pavilion, multiple slides, swings, merry-go-round, and benches. The last park that is located in Mechanicsville is the baseball park that is east of Mechanicsville Elementary School which contains two baseball fields. Through the Keep Iowa Beautiful Grant, a citizen committee was formed that will help direct money towards park improvements and trail expansions, among other projects.



*Playground at Cruces Park on W 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, Mechanicsville*

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## Arts and History

### Public Art & Landmarks

Public art is a great way to affordably and meaningfully establish a unique and culturally active place and can be used by communities to gain cultural, social, and economic value. Public art can create civic icons that attract tourism and, in some cases, can spur new community traditions. Public art can also serve to transform everyday places like clinics, town halls, parks, or blank retail storefronts into vivid expressions of culture and creativity. One of the most notable pieces of art in the city of Mechanicsville is the “Heaven Amongst the Cedars” street mural, located at 300 E 1<sup>st</sup> St. Another piece of art that means a great deal to the community is the Doughboy statue that is located in Rose Hill Cemetery in Mechanicsville. The Doughboy statues were dedicated to the men who fought in World War 1 and were originally designed by a E.M. Viquesney. The Mechanicsville Doughboy was ordered in 1929 and still stands today as one of only two that are located in the state of Iowa. Other notable landmarks include a flag dis

### Community History

Mechanicsville has had a long history dating back to 1836 when the town was settled by a group originating from Ohio and Pennsylvania. This original settlement was roughly a mile and a half northwest of where the city is currently located. Around 1850 settlers moved south to the current city located where the land was deemed more suitable for building. A man by the name of Dr. Dorwart received more than 40 acres of native American land which was used to join existing land which combined totaled the 120 acres that make up the town’s footprint today. The early residents of Mechanicsville were largely carpenters, mason, and wheelwrights, so thus the townspeople decided that the name “Mechanics” and -Ville would be a fitting description of the town.

The first school was opened in the winter of 1850 by a teacher named Miss Stearns. The first election in Mechanicsville was held on April 6, 1868 with a total of 147 votes being cast resulting in the election of the first mayor, T.C. McClelland. Around this time a number of secular fraternal organizations and non-secular religious institutions were established, including the Presbyterian Society, Methodist Episcopal Church, Patmos Lodge, and the Odd Fellows’ Lodge, among others.



*Doughboy Statue, Rose Hill Cemetery*

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Between 1867 and 1870 a number of fires occurred in the city limits of Mechanicsville resulting in the destruction of a general merchandise store, tenement house, a large clothing merchant, and a local tavern. Since the city's earliest days, it never had any large factories or manufacturing facilities, but it did have a large number of agricultural supply merchants, an opera house, artists, professionals, and various other artisans that supported its economic growth. In 1858, the first passenger train car arrived in Mechanicsville resulting in some of the first out of town visitors that the town had received. In the 1930s the population and economy of Mechanicsville diminished significantly, most likely due to Great Depression. Following World War II, the population returned to its pre-depression numbers of roughly 850 residents. The population and local economy have fluctuated since the late 1990s to the level that it currently stands today.

## Historic Preservation

Preserving and celebrating Mechanicsville's unique historical background was identified as an important objective for residents. In many cases, historic features can be economically generative assets, whether it be an historic downtown or a single landmark. There are many potential incentives and programs at the federal, state, and local level that can help with identifying, re-using, and rehabilitating historic structures and areas.

### Historic Structures and Sites

In Mechanicsville, there are 11 sites that have been identified as being archeological sites and at least one historic site. This list is not always comprehensive nor does it always mean that they are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, nonetheless older structures with significant character regardless of historical significance can be incredibly useful assets to a community. Even if they are not listed on the national historic register there are still programs that can help communities rehabilitate and improve these assets. Many of these archeological sites may no longer contain the original structures, but they may aid in uncovering important local history, which may be used to help improve local character and create a heightened sense of place.



“Amos Miller House,  
Mechanicsville”



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## State of Iowa Historic Development Programs

The state of Iowa provides a variety of economic development programs, many of them provide options for remediating historic downtowns, structures, and landmarks.

### ***Community Catalyst Building Remediation***

The Community Catalyst Building Remediation (CCBR) program provided by the state, assists communities with the redevelopment or rehabilitation of buildings to stimulate economic growth or reinvestment in the community. Funding is available on annual availability and the maximum grant awarded is \$100,000. The program stipulates that 40% of the funds available each cycle is to be awarded to cities with populations under 1,500. These funds are to be used for the rehabilitation of one commercial building per community or two adjacent buildings who share owners.

### ***Historic Preservation Tax Credits***

This program offers tax credits to developers who sensitively rehabilitate historic buildings. The state of Iowa offers this tax credit program to ensure character-defining features and spaces of buildings are retained to help create distinct and vibrant communities. The state income tax credit is for up to 25% of the qualified rehabilitation expenditures associated with the project. A variety of structures can meet the qualifications of this program; it must meet one of the following: it is on the National Register of Historic Places, contributes to the significance of a historic district, is designated as a local landmark by city or county ordinance, or is a barn constructed before 1937. This demonstrates the flexibility of this program, but is not an exhaustive list of requirements. For more information visit [iowaeda.com](http://iowaeda.com).

### ***Main Street Iowa***

The Main Street Iowa program administered by the state of Iowa, works with a select group of communities that successfully complete a competitive application process and commit to exceptionally high standards for downtown economic development. The main street approach consists helps communities capitalize on unique identity, assets and character of their historic commercial districts. Assistance from the Main Street Team includes training workshops, architectural and design assistance, business assistance, and a number of other technical assistance opportunities.

These programs are not representative of all options at the state level, but represent a summary of programs that may be utilized.

### ***Certified Local Governments***

The Certified Local Government Program is a unique partnership between local, state, and federal government to help communities save irreplaceable historic character. Through the certification process, local governments make a commitment to historic preservation by passing local legislation and establishing a historic preservation commission. The commission advises the local elected officials on matters related to historic preservation and undertakes special projects in the community. Acceptance into the Certified Local Government Program makes a community eligible for funding, training, technical assistance, and access to a network of other preservation minded communities.

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## Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to guide the City of Mechanicsville in strengthening the elements that make the city a unique and wonderful place.

### *Community Character*

- Identify and enhance the elements that give the community its sense of place and unique identity.
- Leverage the city's unique traditions, landscape, historic elements, and contributions from artists for economic development, community marketing, and resident attraction and retention.
- Utilize and update existing historic structures in a manner that maintains their outward character, but is adapted to current economic conditions and local needs.

### *Arts and Recreation*

- Support continuing improvement programs for park and recreation areas.
- Encourage extracurricular educational programs that help engage the youth with the city in the form of beautification projects, art installations, gardening, and engagement that promotes an active citizenry.
- Look for opportunities to expand the City's collection of public art.

### *Community History*

- Establish a community organization that is dedicated to communicating and recording Mechanicsville's history.
- Establish a welcoming committee that helps integrate new residents into the social fabric of the community after they move in.

### *Community Connections*

- Encourage city residents to participate in community beautification through community clean-up events, gardening clubs, friend groups, and other volunteer opportunities.
- Emphasize and celebrate individual and group contributions to the everyday maintenance of the city.
- Work with community organizations to provide festivals and events that bring the community together