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Meridian seeks to approve new comprehensive plan by fall 2019

By PATTY BOWEN pbowen@idahopress.com Jul 3, 2018



The “Out on the Town” sculpture outside Meridian City Hall was made by Daniel Borup in 2016. In the artist statement, Borup said he hopes the sculpture encourages Meridian residents to “enjoy themselves out on the town.”

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Patty Bowen/Meridian Press

It’s been only seven years since Meridian last updated its comprehensive plan — the guide depicting how a city will grow over time, including area of impact, land zoning and estimated growth. In that time, however, Meridian has grown from almost 80,000 residents to around 106,000 residents.

“We’ve grown like crazy,” said Caleb Hood, Meridian’s planning division manager. “The rate of change is what is driving the acceleration of this process.”

The updated comprehensive plan is expected to be completed by fall 2019, but that timeline is “a little squishy,” said Cameron Arial, Meridian community development director.

Planners want to get input from Meridian residents, he said. Over the next year, city staff will survey residents on their feelings about different aspects of Meridian.

Changes and growth

Roughly 21,000 acres have been developed in the city, leaving a little less than half the city’s full area of impact, 40,000 acres, for future development. Of that area of impact, the city has planned for 28,400 acres, or 70 percent, to be used for residential developments.

Hood said the majority of changes will happen in the northwest, southwest rim and rail corridor, where the city is working to find the right mix between commercial and residential.

Meridian is a little over halfway built out, but there are still plots of undeveloped land in the city’s urban areas.

“Cities always grow and evolve over time,” Hood said. “It’s going to be a hundred years before build-out.”

Arial said the type of housing Meridian gets — whether that be multifamily apartments or low-density subdivisions — will be largely driven by market demand, as well as by City Council, which approves or denies development applications.

A factor that may influence what gets built in Meridian is affordability. A lot of people who want to move to Meridian can’t afford to buy a house there, Hood said.

“People can’t afford more of the same,” Hood said.

Meridian Mayor Tammy de Weerd said she hopes the comprehensive plan addresses what kinds of developments can be built in what areas of Meridian and whether Meridian amenities can keep up with the growth a development would bring.

She said there needs to be a discussion on what the limits of developments are in Meridian.

“We need to ensure we can guarantee adequate services to all of those (already in Meridian),” she said.

City staff are working to include some information about limitations of Meridian amenities in the comp plan that City Council could use while making decisions, Hood said.

Historically, residents and City Council members have fought against some multifamily residential developments — as in the case of Summertown and Entrata Farms — saying they have too large of an impact on schools, roads and city amenities.

Arial said moving forward, Meridian is considering zoning high-density residential areas along major corridors like Chinden Boulevard, Eagle Road, Highway 20/26 and Overland Road. By doing this, Arial hopes these corridors will become dense enough that there will be a demand for public transportation.

“That’s sort of how it evolves,” Arial said. “It’s not a ‘If you build it if they will come,’ it’s ‘They’re coming and now you can build it.’”

Hood said a lot of the people moving to Meridian are used to having some type of public transportation, noting that across the U.S. Meridian is one of the largest communities not to have it.

Valley Regional Transit runs several bus lines between Ada and Canyon counties. Three of those routes — Route 40, Route 41 and Route 42 — stop in areas just north and just south of Interstate-84 in Meridian.

Valley Regional Transit and Harvest Church offer free busing services to the elderly or disabled through Harvest Transit, which the city of Meridian helps fund. During budget hearings this month, staff asked for another bus to accommodate more passengers. If the one-time increase of \$70,000 passes, Harvest Transit would have three buses, and would increase its maximum ridership to 1,400. The budget for Harvest Transit this fiscal year was \$69,000, according to Emery. The ridership average for February, March and April was 850, staff said during budget hearings in June.

Level of service

The city will be better able to maintain its level of services, such as police and fire, by being more strategic about where large residential developments are built, Hood said.

The Meridian Police Department asked for a \$1.9 million increase in next year’s personnel budget so it can hire eight people. The department has 105 officers and seven lieutenants, Deputy Police Chief Tracy Basterrechea said. The department projects it will need nine more officers in FY2020 and another 18 officers by 2022, if growth continues at its current pace.

Police Chief Jeff Lavey said growth in Meridian has given officers more areas to patrol and has meant they need to drive farther to make it to some Meridian houses.

Calls for service increased by 15 percent this year, Basterrechea said.

“As we grow and we annex property, that expands our response area,” he said, “spreading the same number of officers out over a greater area.”

The Meridian Fire Department is working on construction of a new fire station on 2 acres at 1435 W. Overland Road, near Camping World and Idaho Party Barn. The station would “provide essential fire services to the south side of I-84,” according to the Planning and Zoning staff report.

Meridian has only one fire station south of I-84, leading to longer emergency response times in that part of town, according to the fire department’s 2016 report. This will be Meridian’s sixth fire station.

Targeting growth

While developing the comprehensive plan, Hood said he wants to work to increase the ratio of jobs to housing developments in some areas, noting there wasn’t a magic ratio of houses to jobs.

“We do want to have the ability to have the workforce close to jobs,” Hood said.

Hood said the city would like to strategically work to grow some of the already budding industry sectors. The largest industries in Meridian in 2017 were retail trade, health care and social assistance, accommodation and food industry and construction, according to a report by the Idaho Department of Labor.

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The city would like to continue to work to integrate commercial developments into residential neighborhoods, Hood said.

“I would call it placemaking,” Ariel said. “We want places where people can do all things living: work, play, live and eat.”

Ariel said an example of this is downtown Meridian where there is an integration of retail shops, businesses and restaurants, mixed with residential homes.

Downtown Meridian

There is a continuous effort to stimulate downtown, Ariel said. City staff want to bring in more office space and retail while possibly working on projects that mix housing and commercial.

“People prefer to go to their own community for entertainment, for food, for night life — right now those are very limited,” Hood said about Meridian’s downtown.

A huge part of building downtown will be partnerships between the city and investors who have their own plans for the space, Hood said.

The mentality needs to change, Hood said, so developers focus on the interplay between businesses.

“They may go to your shop to eat but they’re coming to my shop to dance,” he said as an example.

The city of Meridian has eased the building requirements in downtown Meridian to encourage developers to build there, Hood said.

The maximum building height in downtown 75 feet, while the maximum height for residential areas is 35 feet and the maximum height for general retail and service commercial is 65 feet, Parks Director Steve Siddoway said.

For non-residential land — except for industrial land — the city requires at least one parking stall per 500 square feet. In downtown the minimum requirement is one stall per 1,000 square feet, he said.

“We encourage innovative solutions,” Siddoway said. “If an applicant can prove to the (urban renewal) board that their parking solution does not create a problem, a lesser amount can be allowed by the city.”

The city is seeking proposals for development of its old city hall building, which currently houses New Ventures Lab. Proposals are due July 25. Ariel said he believes this project will prompt people to look at Meridian in a new light.

“We have high hopes for it,” Ariel said.

“People are starting to look at Meridian differently,” he said. “In the past it has been single-family residential developer with a little commercial. That’s served us well, and that is essentially what our community has become.”

Living in Meridian

The Meridian housing market is the fastest growing in the Treasure Valley, and the West Ada School District is the largest with plans to continue to grow over the next 40 years.

City of Meridian staff tout Meridian as a great place to raise a family and the safest community in the state.

“Meridian’s culture is surrounded around families and youth,” De Weerd said. “It’s not a place to live and work, but a place to raise your family.”

The city is also known for its large parks, said Kaycee Emery, city of Meridian spokeswoman.

Meridian has 2.7 developed park acres per 1,000 residents. The city has 284 acres of developed parkland, Siddoway said, and roughly 106,410 people, according to estimates from the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or Compass.

Nampa has 3.2 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, said Daren Johnson, director of Parks and Recreation for the city of Nampa.

Boise has 5.6 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. Boise has roughly 223,000 residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and 1,318 acres of parkland, according to city spokesman Mike Journee.

Boise has 5,212 acres of open space/reserves, Journee said. The city of Meridian does not have any formal plans to preserve any of it's land in a similar fashion to the Boise Foothills, Emery said. According to a survey conducted in 2017 by the city, 50 percent of residents would support a levy to preserve farmland in Meridian.

A changing culture

Continuing to improve the city's culture will play an important role in bringing another generation into Meridian, which Hood noted is necessary for Meridian's workforce.

Part of bringing those young people in, he said, is offering a variety of housing types so the housing market accommodates all people.

"We just know not everyone wants to mow a lawn," Hood said.

Emery said the city already offers a variety of culturally noteworthy amenities such as Concerts on Broadway and Initial Point Gallery.

Give feedback

Meridian residents can submit their feedback about Meridian or the comprehensive plan by taking a survey on the city of Meridian's website: meridiancity.org/compplan.

At that page, residents can also view the 2011 comprehensive plan and stay up to date with any public hearings or focus groups the city may hold about the plan.

Patty Bowen is the Meridian Press reporter. You can reach her at pbowen@idahopress.com.

Submitting your feedback on the Comprehensive Plan

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