

Feedback on the Rochester 2034 Comprehensive Plan

Introduction

The Children's Agenda applauds the City of Rochester's 2034 Comprehensive Plan for aspiring to create a more prosperous, equitable, and vibrant city. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the draft plan, and hope our recommendations are included in the final plan.

As the draft plan notes, "a comprehensive plan serves as the blueprint for ... land use regulation, development, future investment, and the allocation of critical resources."

We commend the city for expanding the plan's scope to include: education policy, recreational services, public safety, climate change mitigation, workforce development, and many other topics. However, while children are mentioned occasionally throughout the plan, we are concerned that there is no overarching vision for developing and nurturing young people, despite healthy and successful children being the key to Rochester's future.

In our 2017 Analysis of the City of Rochester's annual budget, we said "Prioritize children and youth in the City of Rochester's Comprehensive Plan update. The needs and hopes of Rochester's young citizens should be integral to the Plan's goals, strategies and benchmarks. The Plan should reflect youth input through consultation with groups like Teen Empowerment and the Youth Councils at R-Centers, allowing them to shape their own future community. It should also call for what is needed most for young children, such as evidence-based home visiting, high quality child care and Pre-K, and summer learning programs. In addition, TCA recommends adoption of [Healthi Kids' recommendations](#) to put kids and play first in the Comprehensive Plan Update."

While the Comprehensive Plan contains many components that will benefit children and families, the fact that the vision statement for a comprehensive plan about Rochester's future does not even mention its future residents -- our children -- is a gaping hole that should be filled immediately. Just as the City has begun to include a "Children & Families" section of its annual budget, The Children's Agenda believes the 2034 Plan should also include a particular focus on the unique needs of children and families. The City of Rochester should aim to be the best community to raise a family anywhere, regardless of race, economic status, or background. The comprehensive plan's vision statement should recognize that Rochester's children are the greatest asset of our City.

The Children's Agenda asks the city to strengthen the plan to better address the unique needs of children and their families. Our recommendations will reorient city resources to better support children in all aspects of their lives, ensure city staff in multiple departments are better able to serve young people in the community, and strive to give city children the best possible start to life.

Youth Master Plan

Over the past two decades, many communities around the country have developed a “[Youth Master Plan](#).” Such a plan allows cities to prioritize the needs of children, establish goals, align resources, and maximize youth potential and outcomes across city departments. A youth master plan can effectively serve as a collective impact effort within city government to improve the lives of children in the community. In this comprehensive plan, Rochester should commit to establishing a Youth Master Plan that includes all city departments, community organizations, other levels of government and stakeholders.

Workforce Development and Economic Growth

We are concerned that the current draft of the Comprehensive Plan lacks strategies to promote high quality youth employment programs, ignoring one of the city’s most valuable assets – Rochester youth and young adults. For example, it lacks any mention of the city’s Summer of Opportunity Program (SOOP). Such programs, led and staffed by experienced city employees, could direct youth to local industries that need employees, help young people build workplace skills and ensure positive early employment experiences for adolescents in our community. These programs should also help employers adapt certain aspects of their operations to improve retention and employee productivity among youth entering the workforce.

The city should specifically prioritize workforce development efforts for child-serving professions, and should include strategies targeted to entrepreneurs and small businesses in the early childhood and youth development sectors. For example, the city could create a small revolving loan fund for small businesses and non-profit organizations in this sector, including home-based child care providers. These providers need equipment, capital repairs, and other short term investments to remain open and able to serve children in the community.

The Children’s Agenda also believes Rochester 2034 strategies should build and strengthen Rochester’s early childhood education (ECE) and youth development workforce, prioritizing them as a critical part of our city’s future infrastructure.

Supporting Early Childhood Workers

We suggest the following additions:

- City positions directly interacting with youth should receive upgrades to move them closer to a living wage, and benefits such as help in obtaining higher education, home buying, family-friendly workplace policies, etc. should be extended to all city employees, full- and part-time, who work directly with youth.
- Youth who participate in the city/RCSd/library literacy aide program should be offered experiences and opportunities to explore a career in teaching, early childhood or youth development.

Supporting education or training for early childhood/youth workers

- The city should collaborate with Monroe Community College (MCC) which offers a variety of financial and in-kind supports for individuals pursuing a Child Development Associate degree and recognition through the national [Council of Professional Recognition](#).
- The city should offer tuition assistance, loan forgiveness and other benefits to its employees who work with youth, including possible partnership with [Nazareth College's Community Youth Development B.A. program](#) for Department of Recreation and Youth Services' staff interested in pursuing a career in youth development.

Education

We commend the Rochester 2034 Comprehensive Plan for: prioritizing the community school model, committing to support Roc the Future's collective impact work on education, support for collaboration between local universities and RCSD, commitment to data sharing, addressing race and cultural competence in education, and support for organizations doing youth leadership development like Teen Empowerment.

We believe some of these strategies could be strengthened and others added to improve the academic and social-emotional development of children in Rochester.

Community Schools

A community school is both a physical location and a broader set of partnerships between a school, health and social service providers and other community resources. Our organization is strongly supportive of this model, and we commend the city for its commitment to the implementation of this approach. We hope to help expand and strengthen community schools throughout the city over the next few years.

Specifically, we support these strategies:

- Examining opportunities to co-locate community facilities and programs such as libraries, rec centers, neighborhood service centers, health clinics, childhood development centers, day care, and after-school programs; (SCC-2b & SCC-3b)
- Increase the number of neighborhood and community schools. (SCC-3d)

We also suggest the following revisions and additions:

- Co-located facilities should be attached to public schools whenever possible, and centrally located within neighborhoods. This would help promote the community school model and foster greater parent engagement;
- Police stations should be kept separate from co-located facilities that serve children to limit their exposure to the criminal justice system;
- The city should explore shared staffing and programs at schools to keep buildings open longer during the day;

- The 2034 Plan mentions the need to provide busing for students who live within 1.5 miles of their school (Page 216), but does not mention short-distance busing as a strategy in the action plan. Advocacy at the state level for changing the reimbursement formula for Rochester should be a strategy to create neighborhood schools, reduce chronic absenteeism, and increase parent engagement.

Partnerships between Universities and RCSD

Our community has the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, resources, and capacities of our local institutions of higher learning. We are in full support of the following strategies:

- Support for Educational Partnership Organization agreements between RCSD and the University of Rochester, SUNY Geneseo and others; (SCC-1d)
- Partner with and support the Warner School of Education's Center for Urban Education Success. (SCC-1e)

We also suggest the following revisions and additions:

Rochester Early College International High School has one of the highest graduation rates in RCSD (87% August 2018), and should be strengthened and expanded to serve more students.

- The city of Rochester should work with Monroe Community College and RCSD to create mutually beneficial financial agreements that would allow more students to take classes at the downtown MCC campus;

City and School District Cooperation

Effective and constructive cooperation between the city and RCSD is essential to the success of our community's young people. We are therefore highly supportive of efforts to encourage better student-based data development and sharing between DRYS, RPL, and RCSD; (SCC-1f)

We also believe the city of Rochester and RCSD should cooperate more closely on financial matters to ensure financial stability for RCSD and the best use of city-owned school buildings as student enrollment declines.

- Disburse property taxes to the city school district in a timely manner to avoid stopgap borrowing by the city school district and ensure predictable revenue;
- Cooperatively develop long-term plan for excess school building capacity due to declining enrollment.

Youth Voice

We fully endorse efforts to empower young people to share their experiences and perspectives as a way to facilitate their development and ensure youth services are meeting their needs. Specifically, we support the growth and reach of organizations like Teen Empowerment that foster dialogue and leadership development among young people; (SCC-4e).

Restorative City

The Rochester City School District has made large investments in restorative practices as a foundation for relationship building, social-emotional learning, and as an alternative to harmful exclusionary discipline. These investments appear to have resulted in higher course completion rates and improved school climate. However, students' interactions with adults go beyond school buildings, and all adults who regularly work with youth should employ restorative practices. The community should have a unified approach, and that means becoming a restorative city. We specifically recommend:

- Ongoing professional development for all city employees, especially youth facing staff, in:
 - Restorative Practices
 - De-escalation Techniques
 - Trauma-informed approaches
- The use of community-building circles at libraries, rec centers, and neighborhood service centers

Housing

Given the importance of children and families to the current and future success of the city of Rochester, we are concerned that the housing action plan pays little specific attention to the housing needs of families. Children are particularly harmed by housing instability, unsafe housing, and the consequences of our community's unacceptably high poverty rate.

The Children's Agenda acknowledges that the economics of building larger unit affordable housing is challenging, and developers instead typically build smaller units that can comfortably house one or two people. However, we still need to make affordable and safe housing for families a specific priority. Instead, the draft plan is nearly silent on the housing needs of children and families, aside from acknowledging that more households are childless than in the past.

For example, the draft plan makes repeated references to the particular needs of seniors who desire to age in place, and some of the potential zoning changes explored through this plan are designed to help support that goal. We would like to see a similar articulation of the unique needs of families and a plan for how to achieve that goal. The city has considerable authority from the mayor's responsibility to appoint Rochester Housing Authority commissioners, Community Development Block Grant funds, housing rehabilitation funds, zoning and use policy, code enforcement, and other means.

The city's Certificate of Occupancy process and implementation of the 2005 lead law provides an excellent example of how an existing inspection process was leveraged to pay particular attention to the needs of children. That lead law is a model for other communities in New York State and should be for Rochester as it identifies more ways to support children and families.

Structural Racism

Zoning, land use, and housing policies in our nation have a shameful racist legacy that carries through to today. Present day disparities in home ownership rates, intergenerational wealth, and community resources are the direct result of deliberate disinvestment in communities of color and outright discrimination against African Americans in our community.

With that in mind, the city should adopt policies and decision-making tools (like a [racial equity impact assessment process](#)) that will help direct city resources and programs toward reduction of racial inequities.

The city should value the goal of increased racial integration when evaluating potential zoning changes over the next 15 years, especially when considering proposed transitions from R1 to R2 zoning or allowing greater housing density in predominantly white neighborhoods. Given our community and nation's disgraceful history of racial discrimination, we should view with skepticism efforts to oppose more affordable housing in affluent and white neighborhoods in the city.

In addition, we support the intention to develop a district-wide (RCSD) strategy to address race and cultural competence in hiring, curriculum and school environment. (SCC-1g)

Transportation

The Children's Agenda is largely supportive of the transportation related aspects of the 2034 plan. We applaud efforts to make the city more pedestrian and bicycle friendly, as a more multi-modal community is both more accessible to children living in households without cars and helps ensure children can safely navigate their neighborhoods to access parks, recreational services, libraries, and other outdoor spaces.