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Lee Street Complex Vision Plan

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NC STATE UNIVERSITY  
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# A Vision Plan for the Town of Benson's Lee Street Complex

**Working Toward an Engaged  
and Active Community  
through Design**





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# Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

The leadership of the Town of Benson, North Carolina, wished to explore possibilities for the underutilized Lee Street Complex site, adjacent to and including the Dr. P.K. Vyas Park site, which totals approximately 10 acres - in a location less than three blocks south of the town's main street. The overarching goals of this project were to: (1) engage the Town of Benson's management, leadership, citizens, and stakeholders in the creation of a conceptual vision plan to guide development of the Lee Street Complex site; (2) emphasize the inclusion of environmentally friendly strategies and design education through onsite programming; and (3) support the Town of Benson in developing an increasingly healthy, stable, and engaged community. A secondary goal for the project team was to develop a nature-based concept plan to serve as a template for similar underutilized sites in both North Carolina and regionally.

***This partnership resulted in the creation of a vision plan that addresses particular issues for the Town of Benson, including community engagement, economic development, and identity creation while emphasizing environmental stewardship on the site.***

This document presents the Lee Street Complex Vision Plan in Benson, North Carolina, outlining and highlighting design recommendations for a conceptual plan to support an increasingly active and engaged lifestyle for Benson’s citizens. By exploring opportunities for community engagement and physical activity through an interdisciplinary lens, a conceptual design has been proposed to provide a focal area on the south side of town. This project focuses on the property owned by the Town of Benson between South Elm Street and South Lee Street to the east and west, and East Harnett Street and East Mann Street to the north and south. The plan also takes into account adjacent neighborhoods, and other attractions and pause points in the Town of Benson.

An actionable vision plan was created for the site through a series of workshop-based community engagement sessions, using participatory action research theory, and emphasizing community education and development with participants. North Carolina State University’s College of Design facilitated the vision planning process, connecting the interests and concerns articulated by the stakeholders with best practices in place-making, community development, and citizen engagement. The proposed concept design provides suggestions for how strategic place-making in the Town of Benson can capitalize on existing assets, while increasing opportunities for community engagement, healthy living, and family-friendly recreation. The desire to establish a multitude of gathering places, differing in style but close in proximity, to actively engage the Town’s residents as well as draw visitors from the nearby I-95 corridor, was central to this exploration. Likewise, as energy surrounding small-town community development and environmental stewardship expands, the awareness of this site and the nearby communities will also continue to grow. The proposed concept plan addresses the existing context and future opportunities of the site from the perspective of the local residents, property owners, and town officials, enabling the town to increasingly support its diverse population. By providing differing programmatic opportunities for gathering, both passive and active, as well as a variety of spatial types for recreation and education, the proposed concept plan supports the Town of Benson in advancing their engagement, community development, and healthy living agendas.



First community engagement workshop

An increasing number of small towns across the country are reflecting on ways to transform existing conditions into community assets. The Lee Street Complex Vision Plan project positions the Town of Benson to be an example for these communities with similar contexts, also interested in community engagement, citizen interaction, and healthy living. Design exercises like this one - focusing on existing, underutilized sites - are inspiring, connecting, and invigorating smaller communities throughout the United States. Smaller communities that are distressed in economy, population, and attention are looking at their existing situations with fresh eyes and exploring ways to capitalize on what is available. The proposed concept design and its reflections of the desires of the community highlight how communities can begin to capitalize on their unique assets to address important needs for community connectivity, citizen engagement, environmental sustainability, and personal health. Strategically designed open spaces, both indoor and out, provide adaptable opportunities for special events, education, physical activity, and tourism, as well as provide a number of spaces suitable for simple and enjoyable down time alone or with the family.

Community engagement and participation was a critical element in the visioning and concept design process, with the final concept plan resulting from data gathered at a series of community workshops. Additional information was gathered through fieldwork, site documentation, site analysis, and community tours. The final Lee Street Complex Vision Plan integrates opportunities for community engagement, physical activity, and economic development with a goal of emphasizing existing opportunities and developing new assets for the Town of Benson and their citizens.

This project process assisted the Town of Benson in developing both a vision and a concept for the Lee Street Complex site that inspires future community projects to engage community stakeholders in the critical issues of sustainability, economic development, and community health. The project also establishes a guide for future strategic development processes within the community.

By providing different types of spaces, both indoor and outdoor, for leisure and recreation, as well as numerous areas for engagement and educational uses, the proposed concept plan supports Benson in forwarding their recreation and community development agendas.

# 1. Project History and Context

At the intersection of I-40 and I-95, the Town of Benson is conveniently located on both the main north-south interstate corridor for the East Coast, and a primary route to the North Carolina beaches from many points west. A bedroom community for job opportunities in the ever-growing North Carolina Triangle Region, the Town of Benson is a small, rural community of approximately 3,500 people. Rural communities are increasingly seeking revitalization strategies, while simultaneously being concerned with the quality of citizen health, such as rising obesity rates due to deficiencies in health education, lifestyle opportunities, and appropriate physical environments. The Town of Benson believes that engaging their residents in the development of existing assets will not only enhance community engagement, making a stronger community, but will also work toward sustainable economic development of the town through business integration and development. Spaces for physical education and community engagement alone will not result in a livelier community; there must be place-specific opportunities for community enrichment, recreation, and enjoyment. Establishing an environmentally friendly and sustainable community in small-town North Carolina must include long term partnerships between key stakeholders, such as community members, local and state educational institutions, private businesses, municipal governments, and other agencies focused on community education and enrichment.

The Lee Street Complex Vision Plan is the result of a community-driven concept design and planning process that explored scenarios for developing a community asset on the acreage previously used for the Town of Benson middle school. The existing area, approximately two blocks from downtown Benson, was underutilizing both their built structures and open spaces, without a solid vision plan outlining the potential of the site.

The Town of Benson's Town Manager, Assistant Town Manager, Director of Parks and Recreation, and Director of Economic Development met with NC State University's College of Design in the summer of 2012, to review the context and primary issues with – and desires for – the Lee Street Complex site. After a grant was secured from the NCSU Office of Extension, Engagement, and Economic Development in May 2013, the Town pledged matching funds, and an agreement was established regarding scope and deliverables between the College of Design and the Town of Benson. A detailed meeting reviewing the stakeholders' goals for the project was held in September 2013. This partnership resulted in the creation of this vision plan that addresses particular issues for the Town of Benson, including community engagement, economic development, and placemaking.

The iterative, participatory design process provided The Town of Benson and their stakeholders with a first-class concept design, focusing on increased opportunities for physical activity, diverse spaces, and community engagement for citizens of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. This final concept design puts forth the vision of a healthier, more engaged community through improved relationships between community support, educational offerings, and recreation and leisure opportunities.

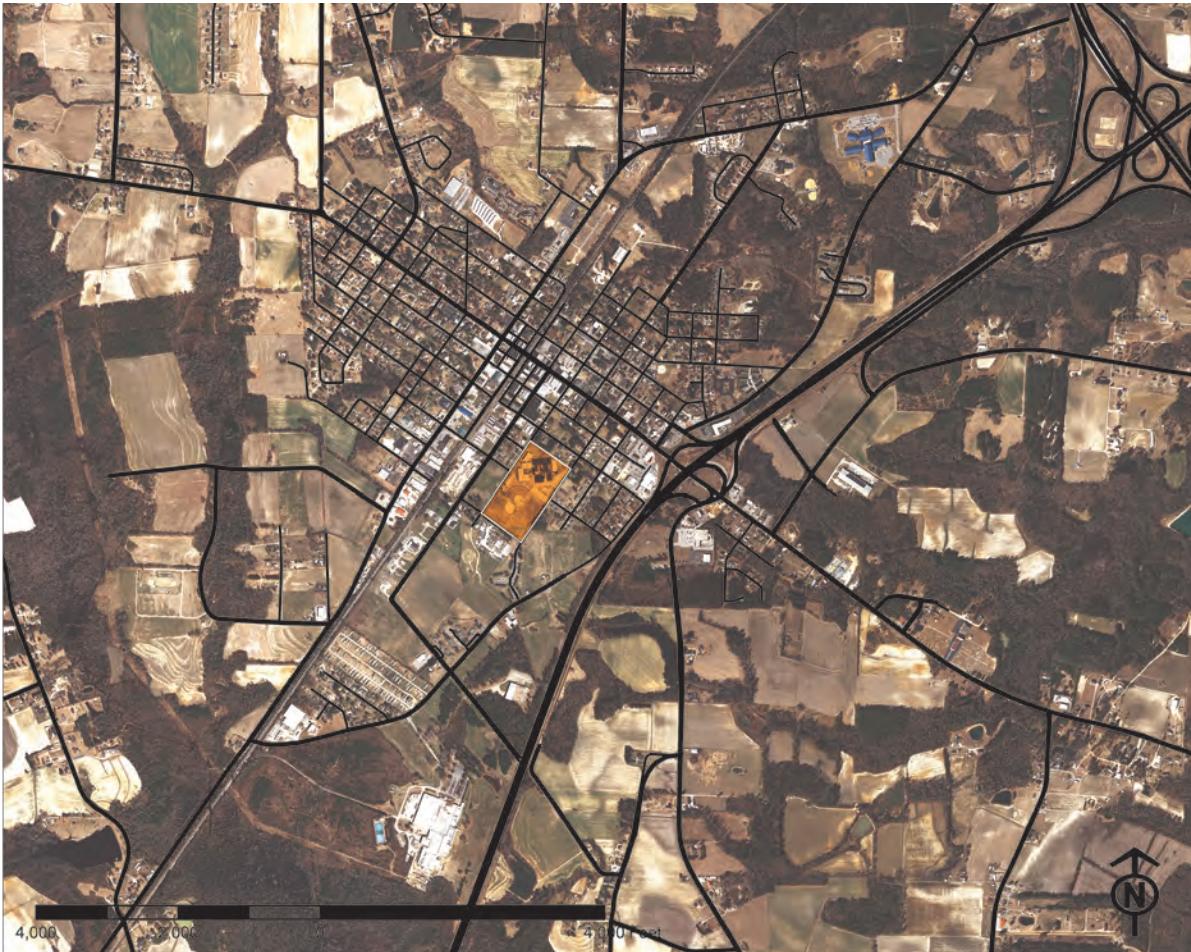


Figure 1.1: Aerial view of the Lee Street Complex site and proximity to the surrounding Town of Benson

The overall visioning process for the project involved three main stages. The first stage was to establish goals with the town and project leadership, and review the proposed process, allowing the entire team to collectively understand and agree upon the project's path. This stage focused on expectations, scope, and boundaries for the project. The second stage was for the stakeholders in the community to identify cultural, social, economic, and physical assets of Benson; to document the present conditions of the town, particularly around the site; and establish what opportunities stakeholders perceived to be beneficial to the future growth and development of the Town. These elements were addressed through three public meetings that were guided by students and staff from North Carolina State University's College of Design, and coordinated in the community by the Town's administration. The second phase also helped to establish both opportunities and perceived needs for the area, while simultaneously understanding the potential for education, recreation, and engagement on the site. Participants felt that focusing on these types of initiatives would directly benefit the Town of Benson's citizens and their growing economy.

The third phase of the project included a series of concept design iterations, completed by the NCSU project team. The areas of focus in the concept design development process included the existing buildings on the Lee Street Complex site; potential outdoor spaces within the Lee Street complex; possible opportunities for adjacent land; and pedestrian connections between the Lee Street Complex site and other points of interest in Benson.



Figure 1.2: Benson Fire Station is situated on the project site.



Figure 1.3: Main Street, Benson

## 2. Project Process

The project process was guided by the College of Design Project Team and included continuous input from stakeholders in the Town of Benson, including community members, town administration, and local business owners.

The visioning process had three major phases:

### 1. Establishing Goals:

The first phase introduced the Project Team to the Lee Street Complex site; the adjacent sites and communities surrounding the focus area; assets and opportunities in the Town of Benson; and the primary stakeholder group. These exercises allowed the project team to become familiar with the issues and context of the Town at the macro scale, as well as particular issues, concerns and goals for the specific site and its surroundings. Multiple visits to Benson also provided the project team with opportunities to collect data, document conditions, and gather photographs of the site and surrounding context.

### 2. Analyze Existing Conditions:

The second phase allowed the team to analyze the existing conditions of the site and the surrounding areas. During this time, the students explored the town, adjacent lands, paths, and possible future opportunities that would impact the development of the site, as well as how different attractions, such as the Mary Duncan Public Library and the Benson Museum of Local History, were accessed and addressed. The team hosted a series of community workshops to engage Benson citizens and understand their thoughts and hopes for the site, the town, and the community. These findings were combined to establish a framework on which to build the conceptual vision plan.

### 3. Outlining a Vision Plan:

Based on the structure established from the above phases, a draft vision plan was crafted. The vision plan addressed not only the specific site of the Lee Street Complex, but also the connections to adjacent sites, downtown Benson, and other town assets, including nearby vacant land that could potentially be included in a larger engagement and recreation plan. The concepts were presented to town and community leadership for their feedback, and were adjusted accordingly.

The process began with a series of smaller stakeholder meetings to review project process, determine the over-arching goals of the project, and examine appropriate community engagement strategies. Specific individuals and community groups were identified to be included in the process. The official kick-off meeting with the primary leadership group established the scope of the project, enabling the project team to clearly understand the boundaries, expectations, any future possibilities considered for the nearby land, and specific goals for the community itself from the leadership's point-of-view. When the team moved into analyzing the site and engaging the community at large, a series of three community workshops enabled citizens to brainstorm about possibilities for both the site and the town, as well as how the site could complement established activities and attractions in and around downtown Benson. Community residents and town leaders attended the workshops and participated in small group discussions led by project team members. Participants addressed ideas regarding the desire for increased recreation opportunities and areas for physical activity, while emphasizing the potential for the site to actively engage citizens of all ages and abilities. The community stakeholders felt that these two elements would help to strengthen Benson's draw to visitors and new residents.

# Engagement.

The three community engagement sessions helped the Project Team to identify opportunities and challenges to consider during the concept development process. These meetings also allowed the Project Team to establish a thorough understanding of the history and existing conditions of both the area and the specific site. The community sessions (described later) granted the participants the opportunity to articulate how they believed the site and project could become a better and more significant asset for the town, as well as how the property, surrounding land, and town itself could develop in the future. The Project Team deciphered themes from the discussions, and used these common threads to develop conceptual design ideas. The stakeholders and Town officials reviewed the developed concept designs as they were completed. This provided the community leadership a chance to comment on alternatives, opportunities, inclusions, and omissions in the concept plan design.



Community residents and town leadership emphasized the need for engaging spaces, inclusion of diverse populations and abilities, and recreation.

# Design Education.

Overall, the following themes emerged representing the future of the Lee Street Complex:

- Engage citizens and visitors of all ages and abilities, and provide opportunities for both leisure and recreation.
- Help support the growth of the Town of Benson in attracting new residents and businesses.
- Provide a unique identity with diverse offerings.



# 3. Community Engagement: Design Process and the Visioning Workshops

The College of Design Project Team conducted an initial stakeholder kick-off meeting, followed by three open community workshop sessions to address the concerns, opportunities, and possibilities for the Lee Street Complex. Students and faculty from the NCSU College of Design facilitated these sessions, allowing the stakeholders, leaders, and community members to provide input and feedback on the values, activities, and opportunities they felt most promising for their community, and what they would like to see in the future development of the town. Participants were asked to identify challenges, opportunities, and desires for the site in question.

The community workshops revealed a number of key themes addressing the development of the Lee Street Complex as a stronger attraction in the Town of Benson. Many of the ideas mentioned highlighted opportunities for continual community engagement, increasing recreation and leisure activities, and encouraging education and entertainment opportunities. Participants were interested in establishing a location for community events open to all ages and abilities, including all levels of engagements and activities.

A kick-off session was held at the Lee Street Complex's fire department training room with members of the town administration. During this gathering, the project team established the breadth of the project, and delineated two scopes to address: (1) the particular site for the Lee Street Complex; and (2) the connections to the site from other points around the town, to ensure that the Lee Street Complex is developed in concert with the rest of the town, and does not become an entity functioning separately without ties to other areas of interest. The overall goal for the project was to work toward establishing a recognizable asset for the community, where Benson citizens could not only participate in community events and enjoy recreation close to home, but also to establish a point of interest for travelers passing by on the major routes of I-95 or I-40. The project leadership was interested in three parallel goals: (1) accessible and unique community engagement opportunities for Benson citizens and visitors; (2) an attractive and suitable location for recreation, including softball, baseball, basketball and soccer; and (3) developing opportunities for further community growth and economic development to benefit the town.

Workshops with residents, town leaders, and other stakeholders were held, engaging participants in small group discussions and exercises focusing on the possibilities for the Lee Street Complex.



Figure 3.1: Community workshops



Figure 3.2: Community workshops

The three following community workshops were held at the Lee Street Complex gymnasium, in a central location on the site and only two blocks from downtown, and were open to all interested community members. The first session was held over lunch and during the regular meeting time for the Chamber of Commerce, who meets monthly to review goals and opportunities for economic development and community growth for Benson. The second session was geared toward elementary aged children participating in the after school program existing on the site in one of the old school buildings, and held after school. The third session was held in the evening and open to anyone to attend and participate. The general public was welcome at all sessions.

## Adults

The first and last sessions were focused on adult participation and were structured the same. Breaking into small groups of 5-8 at each of these sessions, the participants brainstormed about design opportunities in two phases. First, contributors were asked about the context of the site, and of other assets and opportunities in Benson. Second, participants were asked to think about what types of programmed and designed areas they felt would benefit their community, particularly on and around the Lee Street Complex land. Using pre-generated icons depicting potential activities and places such as picnic areas, recreation, leisure, education, family attractions, etc., the workshop participants developed rough maps of community assets that they believed could be wrapped in to a larger assessment of community needs.

Overall, the following principles of sustainable design were adopted as guiding objectives for the vision plan:

- The development will fit with the size and scale of the surrounding context.
- The concept will be inspiring and engaging to encourage physical activity.
- The edges of the site will be both well-defined and welcoming, blending into the context around it.
- The concept will integrate sustainable materials and methods.
- The design will provide access to a variety of nature experiences for all.
- The design will create a sense of place that reflects the rural heritage of Benson.
- The distinct attractions will be connected in the larger scheme of an environmental campus designed to facilitate interaction, activity, artistry, and education.

## Existing Features

1" = 5000'

- 
- Business 
- Education 
- Industry 
- Municipal 
- Groceries 
- Recreation 
- Restaurants 
- Culture 
- Community 



Figure 3.3: The Town of Benson Existing Features map, resulting from both community workshops and contextual research

Existing features, compiled from input at the community workshops, supported the notion of existing recreational, historical, and cultural resources.

recreation  
**29%**

community  
**26%**

infrastructure  
**17%**

entertainment  
**16%**

education  
**9%**

housing  
**2%**

business  
**1%**



Figure 3.4: Diagrams showing Adult resident responses to Community meeting questions

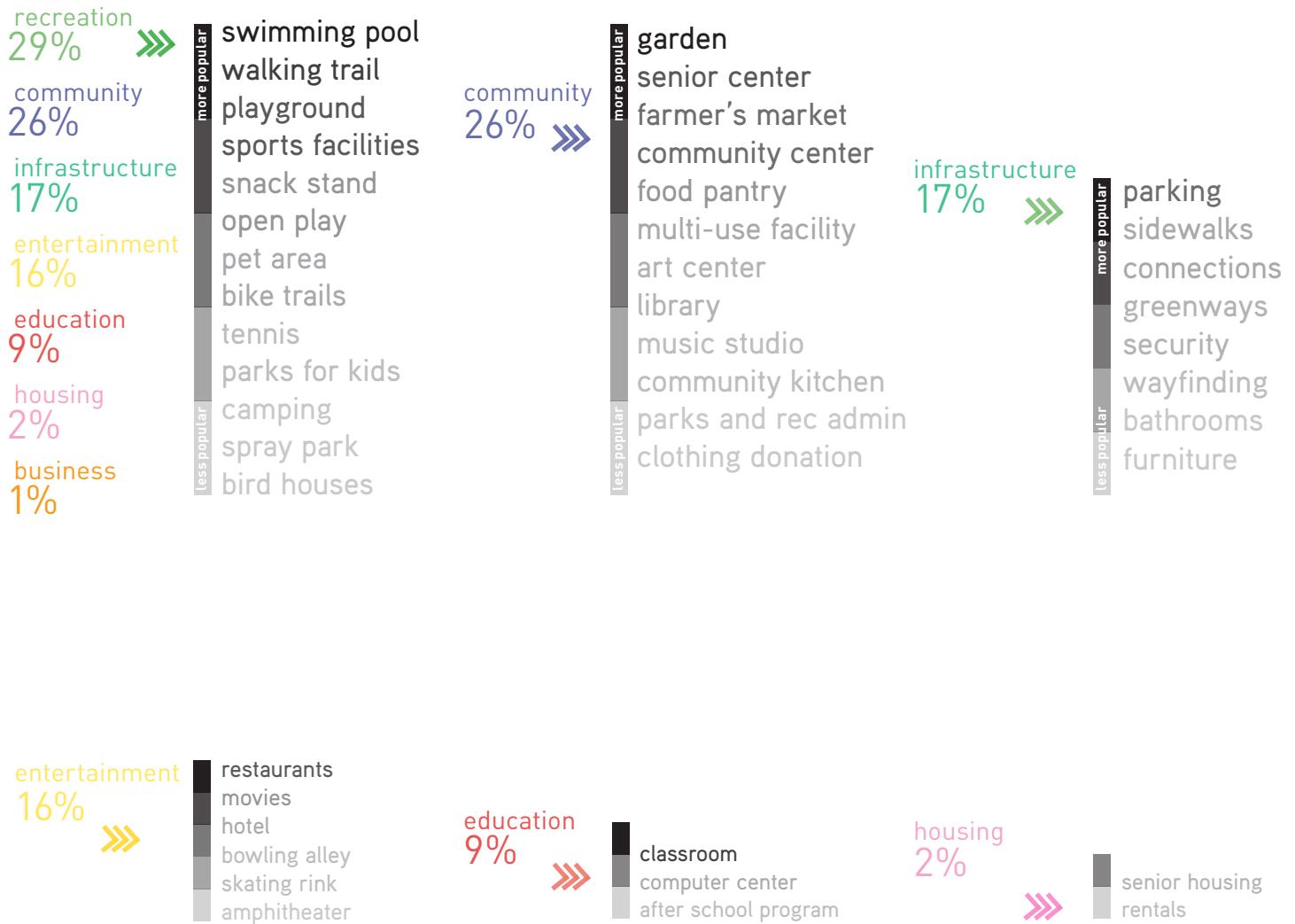
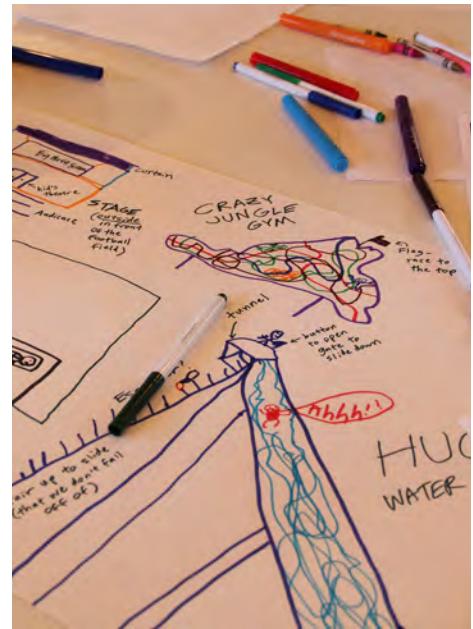


Figure 3.5: Diagrams showing Adult resident responses to Community meeting questions

# Drawings. Image sort. Activity Map.



## Youth

The session to gather insight from the children used a different set of three exercises that attempted to unravel the wants and needs of that specific age group. The first exercise included identifying favorite images and activities from a sheet of twelve images, which would speak to the desired activities of the children. The second exercise was an activity map that illustrated a number of different standard activities, which the children marked to indicate how they currently were spending their time. This not only showed the research team the existing activities of the children, but also the prevailing gaps or absences in the desired activities of the children. The last exercise simply used a blank sheet of paper for the children to draw their favorite space, which could either be real or imagined. This allowed the project team to begin to better understand both the activities that the children wanted to participate in most, as well as the settings that the participating children were interested in occupying. The College of Design team then took the participants' insights and ideas – both adult and children – and used them to generate a foundation for conceptual site design ideas.

# Types of Activities

## Preferred Activities

sports  
25%

outdoor play  
20%

technology  
17%

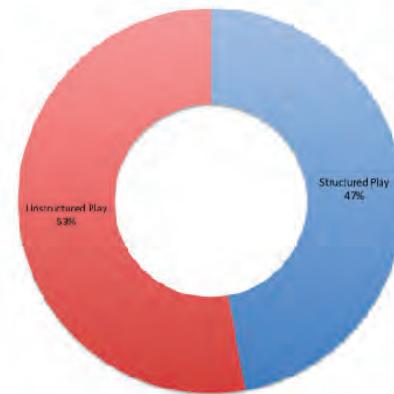
learning  
15%

arts  
13%

other  
10%

- 1  Soccer
- 2  Read
- 3  Computer
- 4  Eat Snacks
- 5  Run

## Play Habits



### Picture Sorting Results



Figure 3.6: Diagrams child participant responses to community workshop activities

## 4. Analysis of Existing Conditions

This project focused on the development of a design concept to rejuvenate an old middle school site on South Lee Street in Benson, North Carolina, that would transition the site into a strong community asset. On the southwestern edge of Johnston County, just across the border from Harnett County, the Town of Benson has approximately 3,400 residents (per 2012 census), and is comprised approximately of approximately 26% African Americans, 57% Caucasians, and 14% Hispanic. The population is 55% female and 45% male. Given the diversity of the population, the Town leadership believed that it was important to establish the Lee Street Complex as a valuable, varied, and distinct attraction for Benson. The resulting concept is not only an effort to engage these diverse citizens in new opportunities for recreation and leisure, but also to provide additional development opportunities to a small bedroom community.

The Lee Street Complex is surrounded a variety of building types. The complex itself, as with the grid for the town, is tilted from off the north-south axis at nearly a 45-degree angle, and is oriented to the NE at the top, and the SW at the bottom. The land directly to the west of the site is small-scale commercial and industrial, scattered with residential, before coming to a railroad track running northeast to southwest, parallel to the site, approximately three blocks away. Beyond the railroad is a very thin buffer of commercial and industrial land, before dissolving quickly into a single-family neighborhood. Single-family residential is immediately to the east of the Lee Street Complex for three blocks before hitting I-95, with small businesses interspersed there. To the north, there is a block of single family residential before hitting the main street of downtown Benson. To the immediate south of the site is a National Guard property, adjacent to a low-income, fenced multifamily complex. Further to the south is primarily woods and farmland, sprinkled with a mobile home development and occasionally single-family housing.

While the specific site of interest for this project was the land and structures occupied by the unused school buildings themselves, it is important to understand how the development of this area could impact adjacent programming and future development throughout the town with respect to its other attractions, current and future. With this in mind, the team not only explored the site of the Lee Street Complex, but also analyzed design opportunities for a tract of land across South Elm Street to the west, that could begin to help support the mission and goals regarding the growth of the Town.

While observing the site, the project team noticed a number of points to consider during the development of the concept plan. First, there is the lack of an established entrance to southern neighborhood area, which accounts for a significant number of the current population using the site. It was also noted that there are no established connections to other blocks adjacent to the site. This makes pedestrian traffic unadvisable, and unsafe. Similarly, there were often potential pedestrian paths without sidewalks, or – if there were sidewalks – they were in need of patching and repair. Lastly, the project team noted a need to significantly strengthen the main entrance to the complex, as there was no indication of a primary entry point to indicate the arrival at a significant location.



Figure 4.1: Existing parking and fields



Figure 4.2: Adjacent neighborhood



Figure 4.3: South entrance perimeter condition

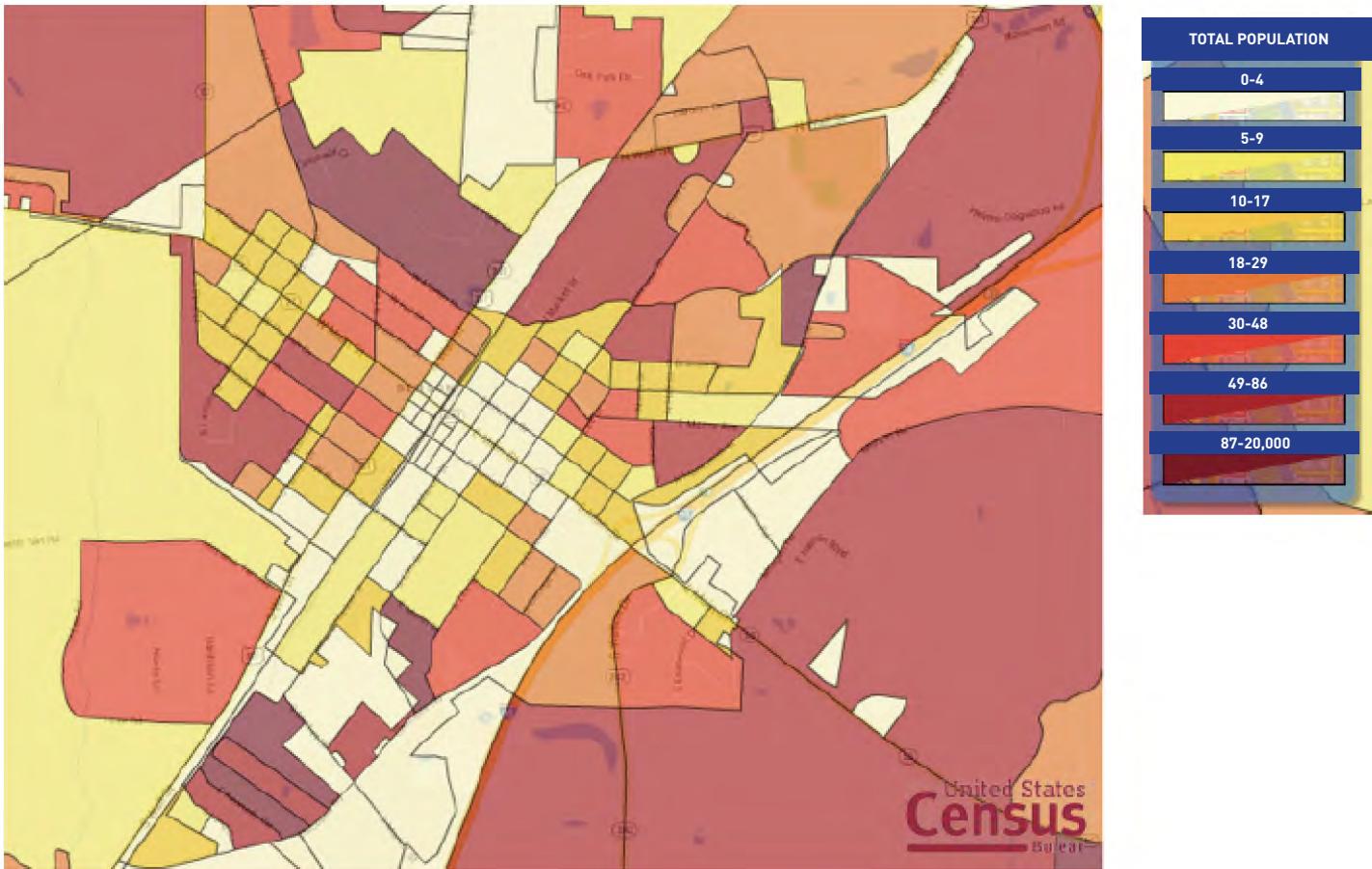
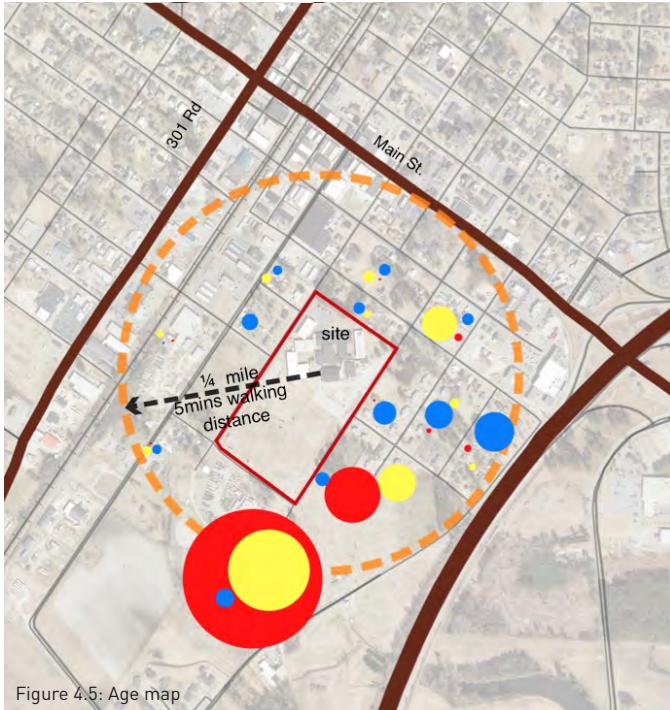
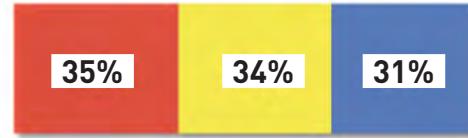


Figure 4.4: Population density map

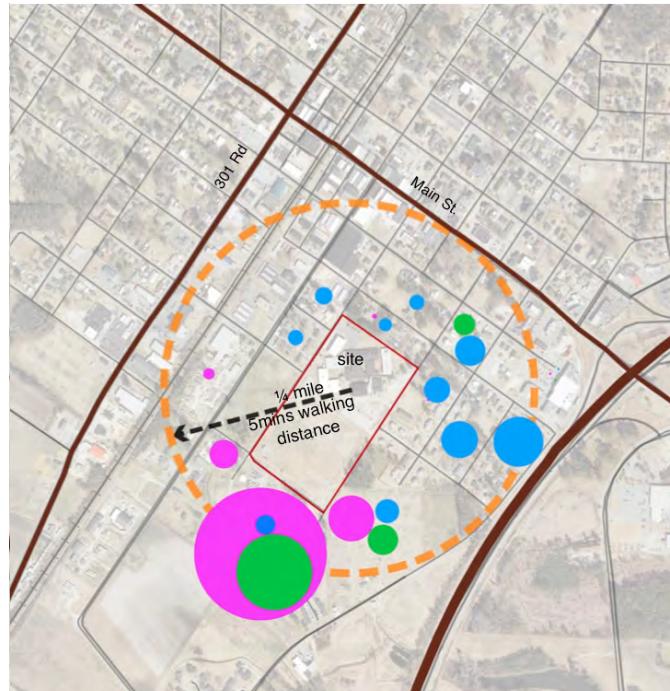


## 1/4 Mile from the Site

### Age Chart



- 0-18 yrs
- 18-50 yrs
- 50 yrs and over



## 1/4 Mile from the Site

### Race / Ethnicity Chart



- Black
- White
- Latino



Figure 4.7: Existing cafeteria building



Figure 4.8: Existing Lee Street Complex campus

## Site Opportunities

Given the existing conditions of the Lee Street Complex site and the PK Vyas Park grounds, there are a number of opportunities presented. The quality of the parking areas is lacking, and provides significant opportunity to reconfigure and upgrade the arrival, parking, and departure experiences on site. While parking is not a focal point of the site, and should not overshadow the recreation and engagement aspects of the concept, it is an important element for the site and community. Large numbers of people visit the site for sporting events, and as the site is developed, the visitors will increase in number. At least some parking must be provided, while others can park nearby and walk, even from downtown Benson.

Once a number of the buildings have been removed, a considerable amount of open space will be available for design. This open space, without a significant number of constraints, will allow the concept design to flow more freely, and include a number of different types of spaces to encourage diverse activities and visitors. The walking trail could also be further developed, supported, and continued into other areas of the site.

The neighbors specifically adjacent to the Lee Street Complex site also needed to be considered during the development of the concept plan. Specifically, the final concept proposal needs to take into consideration the horses and livestock that are on the lot to the north east on Lee Street, as well as the daycare close to the site on the southwest. The walking trail and multi-family housing development to the south were also thoroughly considered.

## Key Issues

The design team compiled all of the data from the workshops to establish the following prominent goals:

- The citizens are interested in improving recreation and community-oriented development on the site.
- Recreation suggestions included a swimming pool, walking trail, playground, and sports facilities.
- Community improvement suggestions included a garden, senior center, farmer's market, and community center.

Other top concerns and opportunities were themed around infrastructure, entertainment, and education improvements.

- Infrastructure improvement suggestions included parking, sidewalks, connections, and greenways.
- Entertainment improvement suggestions included restaurants, movies, hotels, and a bowling alley.
- Education improvement suggestions included classrooms, a computer center, and continuing to facilitate the after school program.

The design team also identified emergent themes for the concept design in moving forward, which became guiding principles throughout the design process:

- Accessibility to all
- Multi-generational
- A third-place
- Connected to town

# 5. Envisioning Benson's Lee Street Complex

## The Vision Plan

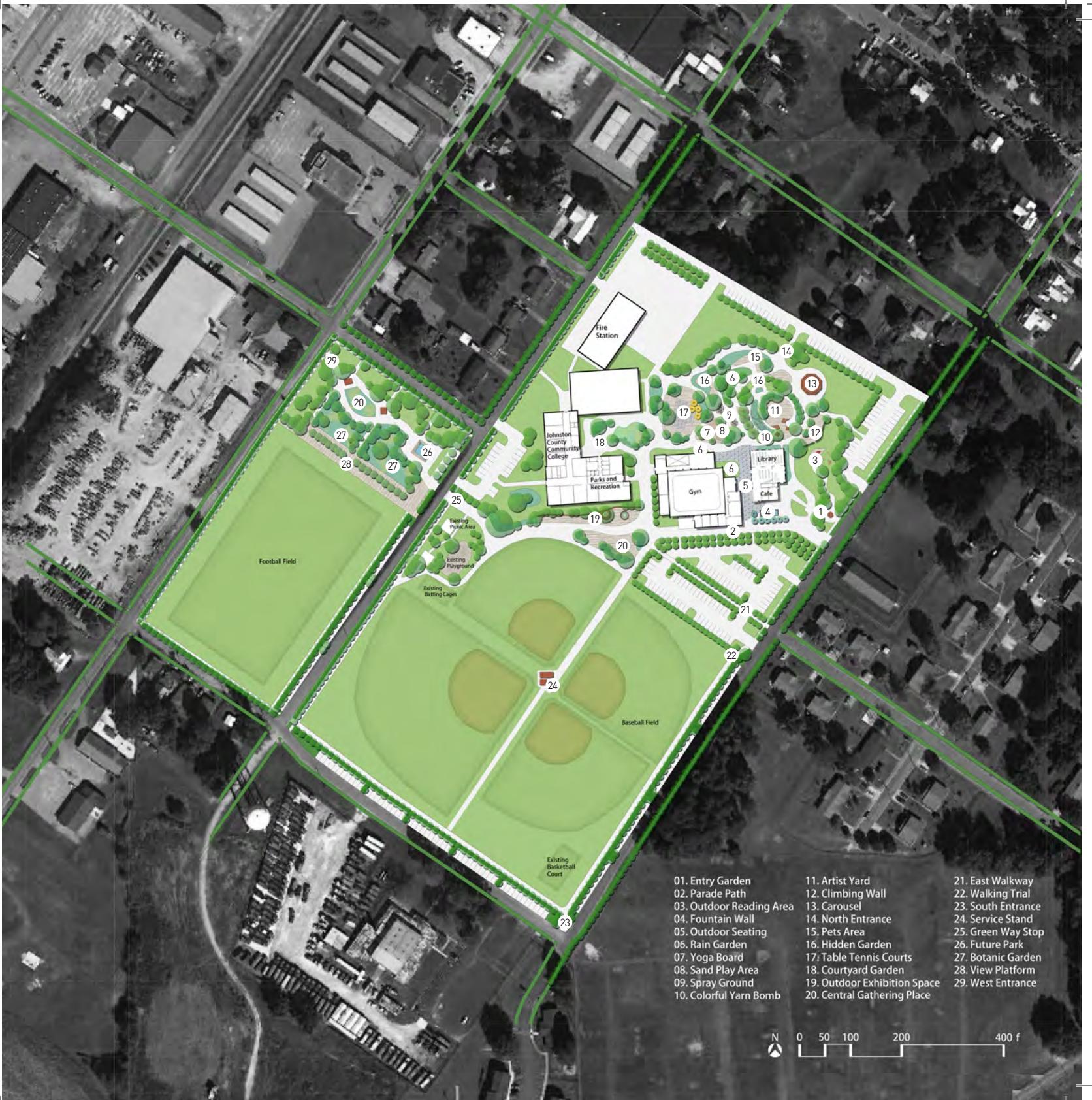
The vision plan primarily addresses the interests and needs related to the specific Lee Street Complex site, and addresses how the site would be connected to and work in tandem with other aspects in Benson. The comprehensive vision plan acknowledges particular issues for the site, understanding that the Lee Street Complex site can become a connecting element between the less-dense side of town and the side of town that is more stable and densely populated, using it as a bridge to create a much larger community asset for the Town of Benson.

## The Site Concept

The Lee Street Complex site has a significant number of innate opportunities that the proposed vision plan takes into consideration. First, the concept can capitalize on the centrality of the site, taking into account its close neighbors and communities on all sides, as well as downtown Benson only a few blocks away. The complex's location is within easy walking and biking distance from a number of residential areas and housing complexes, as well as other attractions in town. Second, the existing uses on the site, such as the walking trail, the ball fields, and the gymnasium, already bring a significant number of community members to the site. The vision will help to unify the site to be a single destination, rather than a series of individual endpoints. Third, the amount of available acreage provides ample space to create a variety of different gathering spaces. The vision plan will use this open space to encourage community engagement and interaction, supporting Benson's continuous journey toward a healthy, sustainable, and engaged community.

The goal for the site is to provide a variety of different spaces that will encourage community engagement in Benson, through recreation, leisure, education, and entertainment. This will be made easier by removing a number of the existing buildings, and analyzing the needs of the larger community beyond the specific boundaries of the site. It is a goal for users of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds to be engaged in the activities and spaces on the site, and be comfortable and at home in the complex.

Specifically, the concept plan looked to strengthen the presence of the existing ball fields, by both reinforcing the walking trail and retrofitting the existing parking while adding new parking capacity. The concept plan also endeavored to unify the west and south communities, the new fire station, new and existing parking, and the structures that were to remain. Two main pedestrian entrances on the west and east were established, as well as suggesting the site be a new greenway destination. The concept plan also connects the park to the empty adjacent land to the west, including its potential for a new public space. Given this scope, the center node along the spine of the main site will be one of the main pause points and unifying strategies at the heart of the park.



Football Field

Baseball Field

Existing Basketball Court

Existing Batting Cages

Existing Playground

Existing Picnic Area

Fire Station

Johnston County Community College

Parks and Recreation

Gym

Library

Cafe

- |                          |                              |                    |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| 01. Entry Garden         | 11. Artist Yard              | 21. East Walkway   |
| 02. Parade Path          | 12. Climbing Wall            | 22. Walking Trail  |
| 03. Outdoor Reading Area | 13. Carousel                 | 23. South Entrance |
| 04. Fountain Wall        | 14. North Entrance           | 24. Service Stand  |
| 05. Outdoor Seating      | 15. Pets Area                | 25. Green Way Stop |
| 06. Rain Garden          | 16. Hidden Garden            | 26. Future Park    |
| 07. Yoga Board           | 17. Table Tennis Courts      | 27. Botanic Garden |
| 08. Sand Play Area       | 18. Courtyard Garden         | 28. View Platform  |
| 09. Spray Ground         | 19. Outdoor Exhibition Space | 29. West Entrance  |
| 10. Colorful Yarn Bomb   | 20. Central Gathering Place  |                    |



Station

Johnston  
County  
Community  
College

Parks and  
Recreation

Gym

Library

Cafe





- |                        |                                 |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 01. Entry Garden       | 11. Artist Yard                 |
| 02. Parade Path        | 12. Climbing Wall               |
| 03. Outdoor Reading    | 13. Carousel                    |
| 04. Fountain Wall      | 14. North Entrance              |
| 05. Outdoor Seating    | 15. Pets Area                   |
| 06. Rain Garden        | 16. Hidden Garden               |
| 07. Yoga Board         | 17. Table Tennis                |
| 08. Sand Play Area     | 18. Courtyard Garden            |
| 09. Spray Ground       | 19. Outdoor Exhibition<br>Space |
| 10. Colorful Yarn Bomb | 20. Central Gathering<br>Place  |

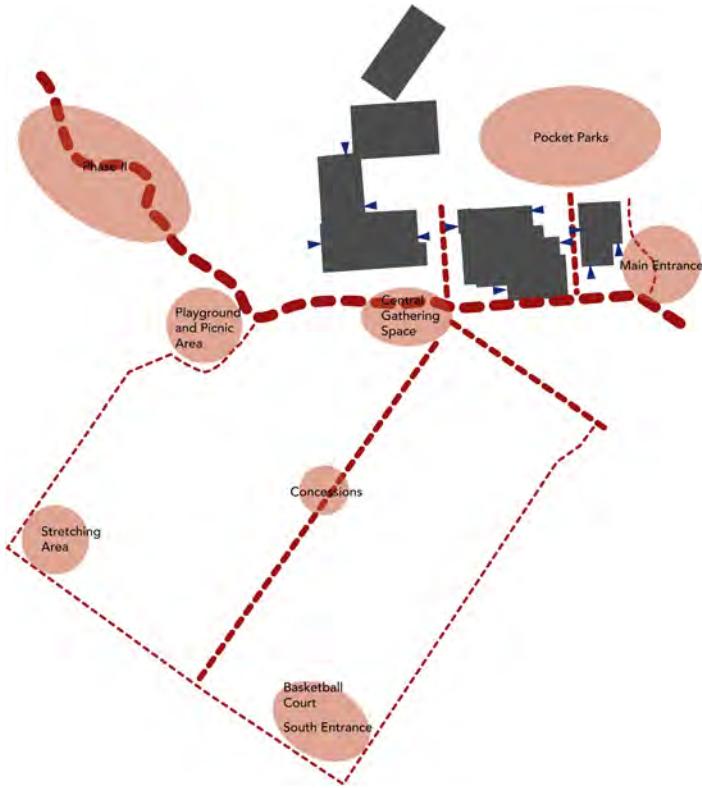


Figure 5.1: Unification and spine diagram

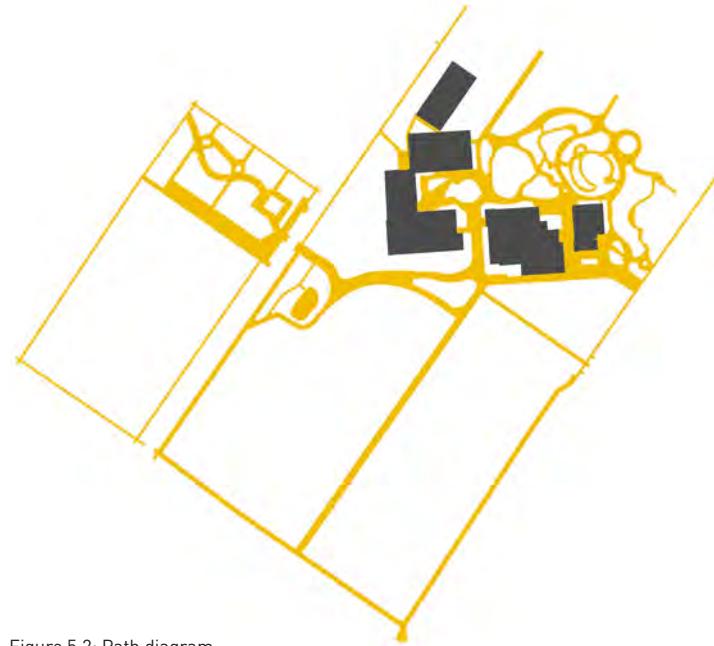


Figure 5.2: Path diagram

As the primary spine for both programs and circulation, the main promenade path will connect to the principal spaces such as the entry garden, pocket parks, courtyard garden for future community college space, the existing playground, and service required for the athletic fields. The spine also provides ready access to the renovated buildings and currently under-used outdoor space. Landscaped spaces actively work well with accessible building entries and public service areas.

Providing a balance of recreation, unstructured open space, and food will help to establish a new community hub for the Town of Benson. New plantings will provide more shady places and help to shelter the existing playground. Significant landscape features include a balance of softscape and hardscape; traffic-calming pavement patterns and strategies; a water spray installation; strategically placed trees and shrubs; a yarn tree series; unique pavement patterns for the gathering space between the Activities building and the Library; and mounded earth to create unstructured fun spaces while helping to reduce the noise from the north side of the park.

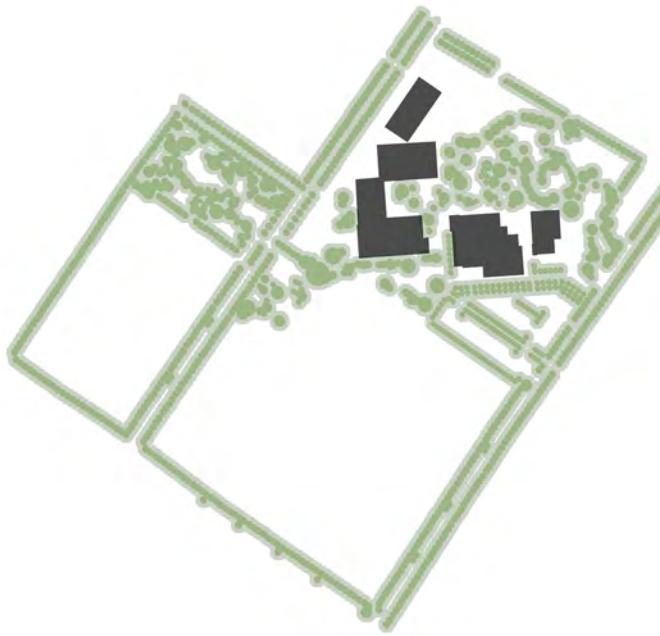


Figure 5.3: Shading diagram



Figure 5.4: Green space diagram

With more than 60% of soft space in the long-term concept plan, and a path system that provides complete accessibility to streets, buildings, parking spaces, open spaces, and services, this concept establishes an active, diverse hub for the Town of Benson.



Figure 5.5: Main complex entry

## Identity

Determining an identity for the Lee Street Complex site was an important first step in the design process. The notion of identity is critical for the initial programming of spaces, as well as to help to ensure the site's long-term success. After much deliberation and analysis of alternatives, the NCSU design team determined that the Lee Street Complex site would function most effectively and efficiently as the headquarters for the Town's Parks and Recreation Department. The concept for the Lee Street Complex allows the site to host a large portion of the town's recreation spaces, including baseball, soccer, football, an outdoor basketball court, and indoor basketball facilities, while adding activity rooms, multi-purpose spaces, and indoor exercise facilities such as weight-lifting and racquet ball. Clarifying the identity for the Lee Street Complex site allows the existing Recreation Center to the north of town to create a distinctive role for itself as a South Johnston County Senior Center. Establishing a clear identity for the two sites, both individually and to work together, is key to the success of both areas, and establishes an overall roadmap from which to move forward in larger-scale, long-term planning efforts.

Inspired by the organization of the overall Lee Street Complex site along a bisecting walkway, colorful façade treatments will wrap different parts of each building and act as a common, visual thread to unify the new and the old. This treatment can take several different forms on the different façades, such as providing shading on the south side of the gymnasium, a colorful accent around a north-facing window, shelter to protect and signify an entryway, or even be seen on a sculpture or piece of public art. By creating a theme by using a consistent color and/or material and varying its application, the town of Benson has the opportunity to establish a highly functional and custom architectural element to act as a landmark for its community.

## Existing Buildings

Given the proposed concept plan and the condition of some of the existing structures, several of the current buildings on the site will need to be demolished, which will free up significant land for the development of strategic outdoor gathering spaces. The only buildings that are recommended to be left standing are the 16,000sf classroom building, which has been previously renovated; the gymnasium, which is used seven days each week; and the cafeteria building. It is suggested that all the other buildings be razed.

The remaining buildings present significant opportunities for indoor programming, and will contribute to the year-round use of the site. These developments would ensure that the community center is programmatically well-rounded and accessible to all ages and types of activities. The concept plan recommendations take particular care to include activities that will activate the site throughout the day, from 5:00am- 10:00pm. The diversity of uses included in the scheme ensures an active and well-balanced community hub, which establishes a safe and welcoming place for both children and adults of all ages. On weekdays, activities can begin early in the morning, before the regular working and school hours, with the indoor exercise facilities and potentially a walking track. Different community members can continue to use the site throughout the day in the office areas, multi-purpose spaces, library, and playgrounds. In the evenings, spaces intended for community college courses will draw adults with an educational focus, while the gymnasium and exercise facilities will bring in active groups. The diversity of programs included in the design is key to the overall success of the site. Special care should be given to encourage the site to be used at all hours of the day.

## Office Building

The 16,000 square foot L-shaped building, nearest to Elm Street and the renovated fire department buildings, offers the most promising opportunity for rentable space in the complex. The existing plan of the building is ideal for both classroom and office use, making it a strong asset for the town overall. Given the size, an educational organization such as Johnston County Community College would only need approximately half of the floor plan to facilitate their activities.

The other half of the building is programmed as the new home for Benson's Parks and Recreation Department. This space allocation includes five offices, a communal break room, private restrooms, a large multi-purpose room, and two flexible activity rooms. The building is adjacent to the gymnasium and field complex, providing easy access for parks department staff. This location would also provide easy oversight for the proposed additions to the gym, such as the weight room and the racquetball court.

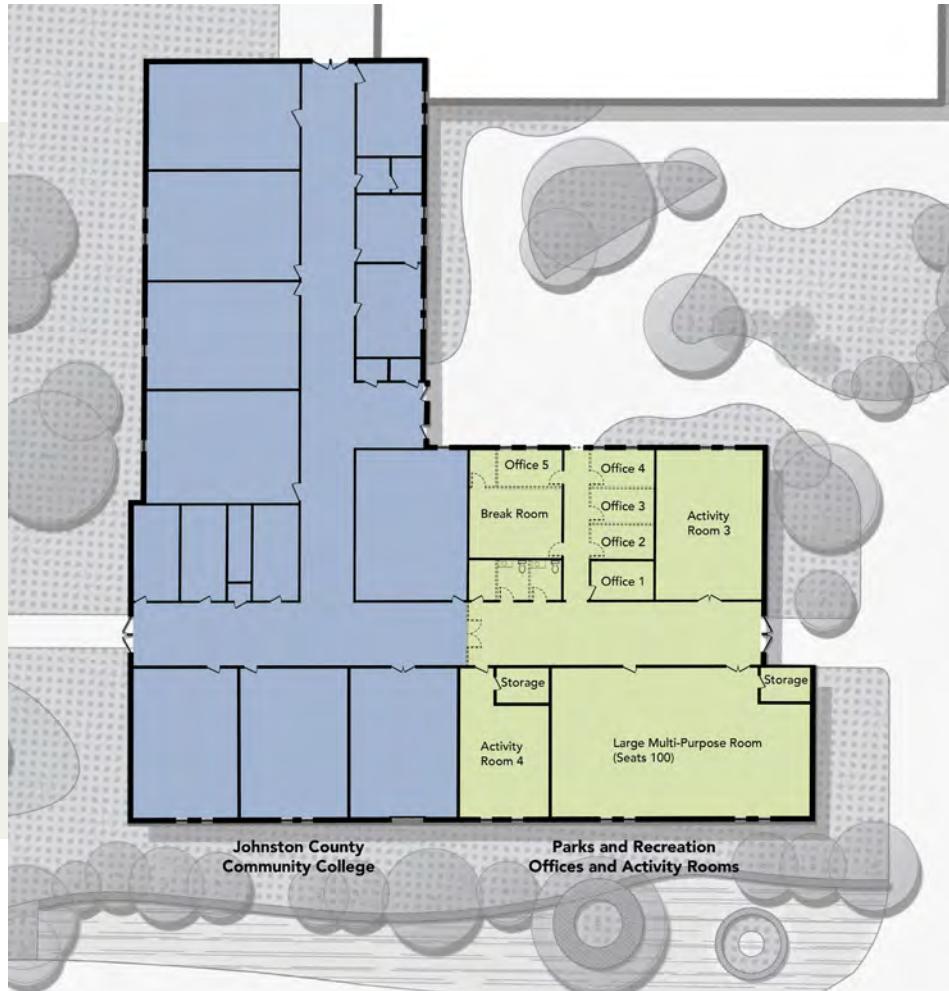


Figure 5.6: Office Building plan

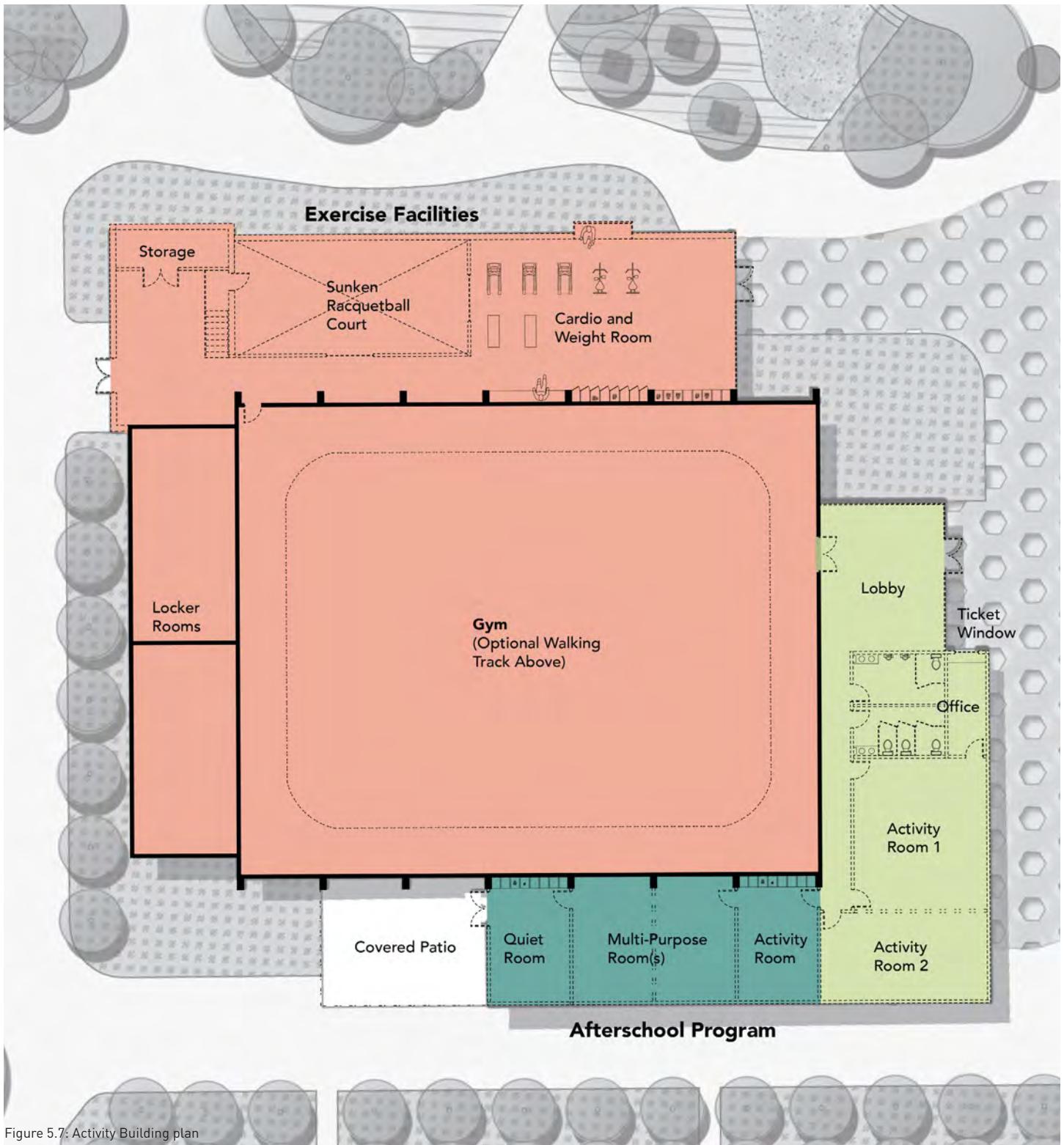


Figure 5.7: Activity Building plan

## Activities Building

The existing gymnasium sits at the center of the Lee Street Complex site and will play a significant role in establishing a strong, revitalized identity for the site overall. This building will function as the heart of the site, setting the pulse for the rest of the complex. The gymnasium structure is to remain as-is, with an option to incorporate a raised walking track around the perimeter of the building above the bleachers. The existing locker rooms will also remain, though improvements and upgrades may be necessary. To accommodate additional programs and activities, the concept plan wraps support spaces around portions of the gymnasium's shell, which would minimally impact the existing structure. One addition is proposed to add space for indoor exercise facilities including cardio and weightlifting, as well as a sunken racquetball court, along the northern edge. A new transparent lobby, a series of activity rooms, and spaces to house an after school program is added in another new volume along the southern and western facades.

The transparent lobby is an inviting entrance to the gymnasium, increasing visibility and improving the connections between the parking lot and the gym interior, as well as between the gym and the neighboring library. The lobby will serve as a beacon to the public, inviting community members into the indoor facilities to engage and participate.



Figure 5.8: Building section through locker rooms, gymnasium, and new entry

The after school program has a separate entrance toward the southwest corner of the building, allowing it to function independently. The after school program is a wonderful way to ensure that children and their families visit the site every evening, and will encourage children to take advantage of the existing resources on-site, that they may otherwise not regularly come in contact with: free open space, a playground, indoor and outdoor basketball courts, a library, and ball fields.

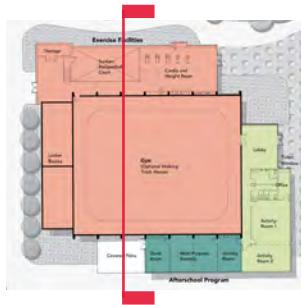


Figure 5.9: Building section through proposed racquetball court, gymnasium, and After School Entry space



Figure 5.10: Entry to the After School Program spaces



## Library Building

The existing cafeteria building on the site presents a unique opportunity for flexible programming. The building contains an existing kitchen, which can be transformed into a small cafe, while the existing open space previously used for lunch tables provides an opportunity to relocate the library stacks and pair leisure and educational programming with the established recreation on the site.

With the Mary Duncan Public Library relocating to the Lee Street Complex site, the Benson Museum would be free to expand into the existing library space on Main Street, gaining much needed square footage. The library would gain an opportunity to reposition itself as a modern community center, providing cafe space and the traditional quiet reading areas adjacent to spaces full of activity and energy. Providing indoor community spaces at the Lee Street Complex site ensures that families of all ages and all sizes are able to find an activity in which to participate, as well as providing a theoretical and programmatic balance for the Lee Street Complex. The Complex becomes, in a sense, a one-stop shop. Mom can use the walking track while a grandparent takes the kids to story time. During big brother's baseball game the younger kids can check out books, and the adult can buy a cup of coffee. Singles gather for relaxing chats on the lawn, or sit outside of the library and people watch. Increasing the uses of the site will increase traffic, and encourage a wide variety of people to stay for a longer period of time.

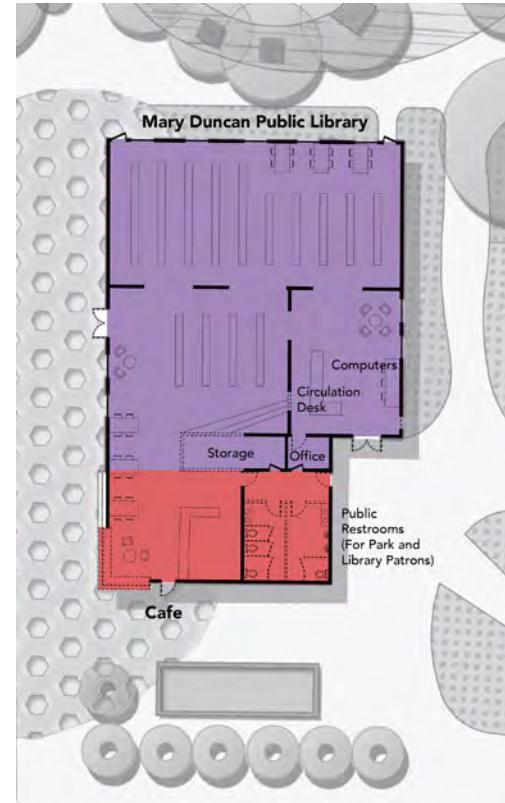


Figure 5.11: Library Building plan



Figure 5.12: Proposed library interiors



Figure 5.13: Courtyard perspective walking from the pocket parks at the rear of the site toward the Gym/ Library courtyard



Figure 5.14: Courtyard section between the gymnasium entry and the new library building

## 6. Connections

The connection between the Lee Street Complex and other amenities, including downtown Benson should be a rich pedestrian or bicycle experience to encourage use and activity flow between the residential areas and recreation destinations.

Key destinations and existing roadway widths provide a hierarchy system of pathways connecting the Lee Street Complex with the surrounding town. Width is available in each pathway type currently to support the inclusion of street trees as well as ample sidewalks. Adding a sharrow for bike travel does not require added width to the road, but a reallocation of lanes, and would remind vehicles to share the road with their two-wheeled friends.



Figure 6.1: Comfortable walking radiuses from primary sites

- Primary Paths: 10' sidewalks on each side that allows for tree pits and lighting, 6' dedicated bike lanes, and 8' parking on one side of the street.
- Secondary Paths: 10' sidewalks on each side that allows for tree pits and lighting, 12' sharrow lane in one direction, 8' parking lane on one side.
- Tertiary Paths: 9' sidewalks on each side that allows for tree pits and lighting, 12' sharrow lane in one direction, without parking

# Linkages.

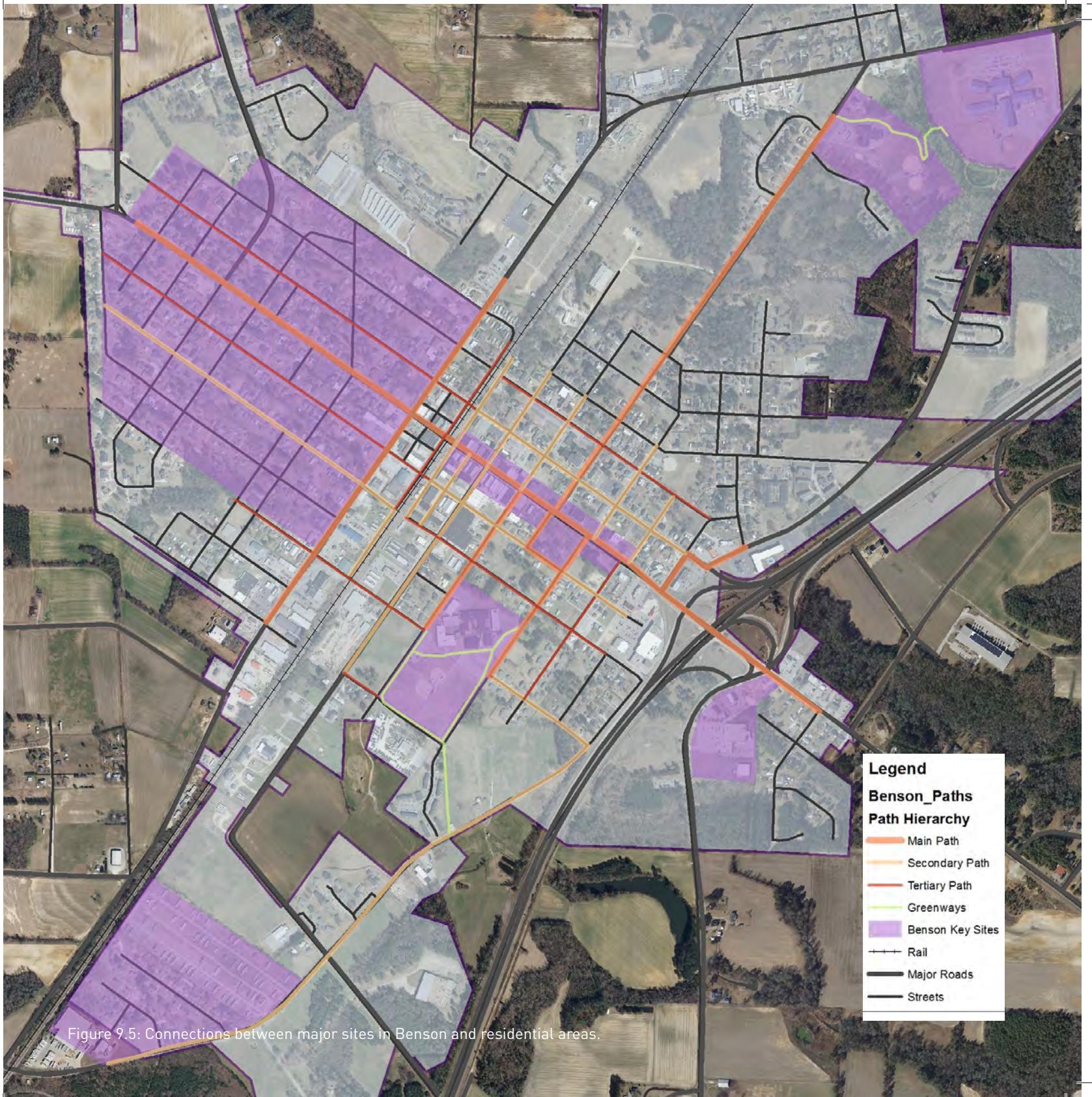


Figure 9.5: Connections between major sites in Benson and residential areas.

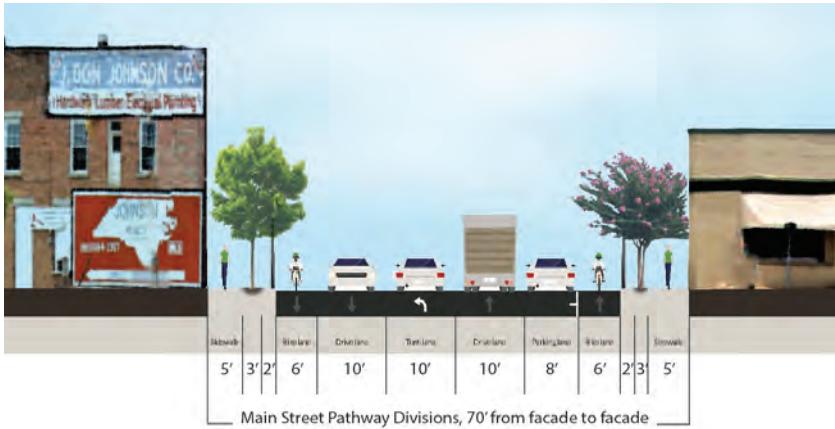


Figure 6.2: Proposed modifications to Primary Paths

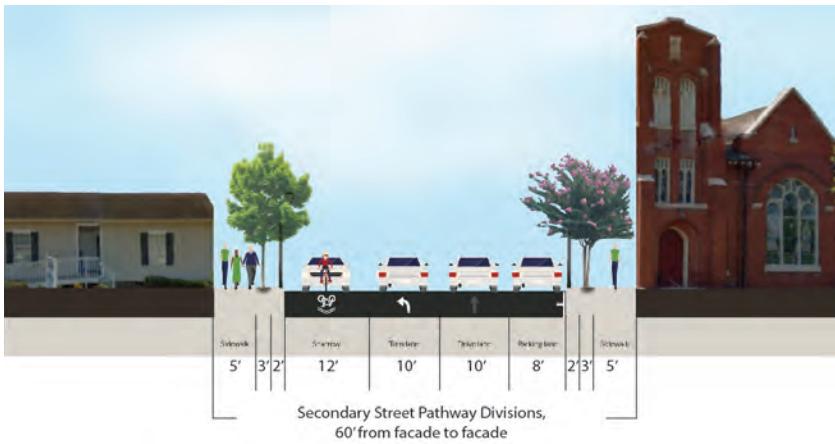


Figure 6.3: Proposed modifications to Secondary Paths



Figure 6.4: Proposed modifications to Tertiary Paths

# 7. Environmental Awareness

The proposed concept plan attempts to lighten the environmental impact of the complex through a number of design moves, which would need to be detailed in the next steps. In addition to the larger moves of increasing the green and pervious spaces on the site to assist with water filtration and stormwater issues, the concept design adds a rain garden at the north side of the gymnasium. By planting this shallow depression in the landscape with native wetland and prairie grasses and wildflowers, the roof runoff from some of the largest roofs on the site can be captured and mitigated. This strategy could be replicated at other location on site, particularly around large amounts of paving (such as parking lots) or near buildings to gather additional roof runoff.

Other passive moves in the design include shading structures on the south side of the gymnasium and the windows facing south on the new after-school addition. This southern shading helps to diffuse the strong south-facing sun, while still allowing for natural daylighting in the spaces. It also minimizes glare as well as heat gain that would stress the mechanical units in the building. Also, the orientation of the gymnasium is promising for solar panels on the roof, which could be installed to help offset some of the energy consumption of the building, or of the larger complex.

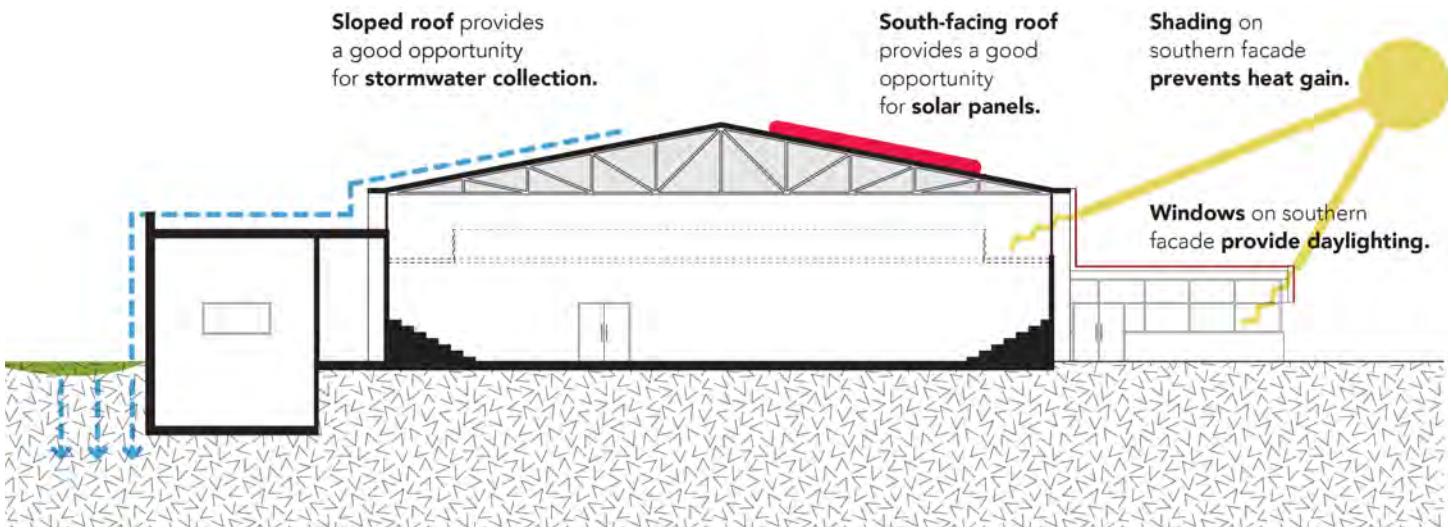


Figure 7.1: Sustainability concepts diagram

# 8. Expected Impacts of the Proposed Vision Plan

It was the goal of this exercise to understand how the Lee Street Complex site could best support the holistic vision for the Town of Benson, and investigate ways in which the existing complex, structures, fields, and surrounding areas could facilitate opportunities to support that vision. It is our hope that Town leadership can use the proposed concepts in this report to increase awareness of the innate potential at the Lee Street complex site, while using this document to help securing funding to support the further development of these projects.

This investigation will assist the Town of Benson in understanding how to best capitalize on their existing assets, particularly at the Lee Street Complex site, and provide ideas for opportunities to strengthen their citizen engagement and create a stronger community. By developing strategies to encourage recreation, community events, leisure activities, and community engagement, the Lee Street Complex Vision Plan can help to guide and influence the future initiatives of Benson as they move to improve as a healthy and sustainable community.



Figure 8.1: Perspective of the Yoga Garden



Figure 8.2: Perspective walking toward the Activities Building from the pocket gardens



Figure 8.3: Perspective of a multi-purpose space at the front of the Activities Building

# 9. Conclusion

The Lee Street Complex Vision Plan offers both short- and long-term opportunities to capitalize on the land adjacent to the site, while also leveraging linkages to nearby town attractions and assets. The plan offers strategies for embracing the community development opportunities, while focusing on increasing the elements of recreation and engagement in the community. Implementing the vision plan will require additional work, including understanding the technical aspects of what it will take to rehabilitate the existing building stock. The resulting vision plan will help Benson leadership to prioritize their efforts, and seek targeted funding for different elements in the conceptual design. It is our hope that this vision inspires future place-making and community engagement efforts, and provides a guide for action in the Town of Benson.



Figure 9.1: Perspective of the backyard spaces, near the Yarn Bombs and Splash Zone



Figure 9.2: Perspective walking toward the sculpture garden

# Engagement & Growth



This effort was purely intended to generate conceptual ideas and was facilitated as an educational process for the Town of Benson. This effort does not intend to replace the professional services and the Town is advised to receive professional services for any implementation stages following this educational exercise. The Town cannot use this document for direct implementation.

