

# TOWN OF VERA CRUZ COMMUNITY REPORT



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vera Cruz, situated along the Wabash River, has unique challenges and opportunities relating to floodplains, natural conservation, and limited commercial development. Public input underscored the need to maintain the town's rural charm and recreational possibilities tied to the river corridor, as well as the importance of adequate stormwater and sewer infrastructure. These insights, supported by county-level comparison data, shaped Vera Cruz's Vision Principles to prioritize flood risk mitigation, preserve the quiet character of the town, and encourage careful use of natural assets for tourism or community events. Implementing these principles involves targeted improvements to drainage systems, possible creation of new riverfront amenities or boat access points, and selective infill housing that respects Vera Cruz's physical constraints and heritage.

## CURRENT CONDITIONS

Vera Cruz is a small rural town situated along the Wabash River, with a historic identity and strong environmental considerations. Understanding its land use patterns, zoning framework, and infrastructure needs is essential for shaping a sustainable master plan.

With limited commercial and residential development, Vera Cruz remains predominantly rural, surrounded by agriculture and conservation areas. Future planning efforts will focus on preserving the town's character while addressing critical infrastructure needs.

The Wabash River and flood-prone areas present both environmental challenges and opportunities for recreation and conservation. Implementing stormwater management strategies and infrastructure improvements will be crucial for reducing flood risks and supporting sustainable development.

By assessing these current conditions, this section provides a strategic framework for balancing preservation and growth in Vera Cruz based on Vision 2035.

## TOWN OF VERA CRUZ

The Town of Vera Cruz, located along the Wabash River, is one of Wells County's smallest incorporated areas. Its rural character, proximity to natural features, and historical development patterns make it unique within the county. As Vera Cruz looks toward the future, understanding its natural constraints, zoning regulations, land use patterns, and infrastructure will be essential for guiding sustainable growth while preserving its environmental and historical assets.

Vera Cruz is defined by its relationship with the Wabash River, which runs along the town's western boundary. This provides both a scenic and ecological asset while also creating flood-related challenges that impact development opportunities. Flood hazard areas, including 100-year and 500-year flood zones, indicate locations where new development may be restricted or require mitigation strategies. Additionally, wetlands and tree-covered areas contribute to the town's rural landscape, offering ecological and conservation benefits.

- Flood-prone areas, primarily concentrated along the Wabash River and surrounding low-lying zones, require careful planning for development and infrastructure investments.
- Wetlands and tree coverage provide natural buffers, supporting environmental preservation and limiting areas suitable for future growth.
- Parks and open space opportunities contribute to recreational access, benefiting both residents and visitors.

Maintaining a balance between environmental preservation and development feasibility will be critical to the long-term sustainability of Vera Cruz.

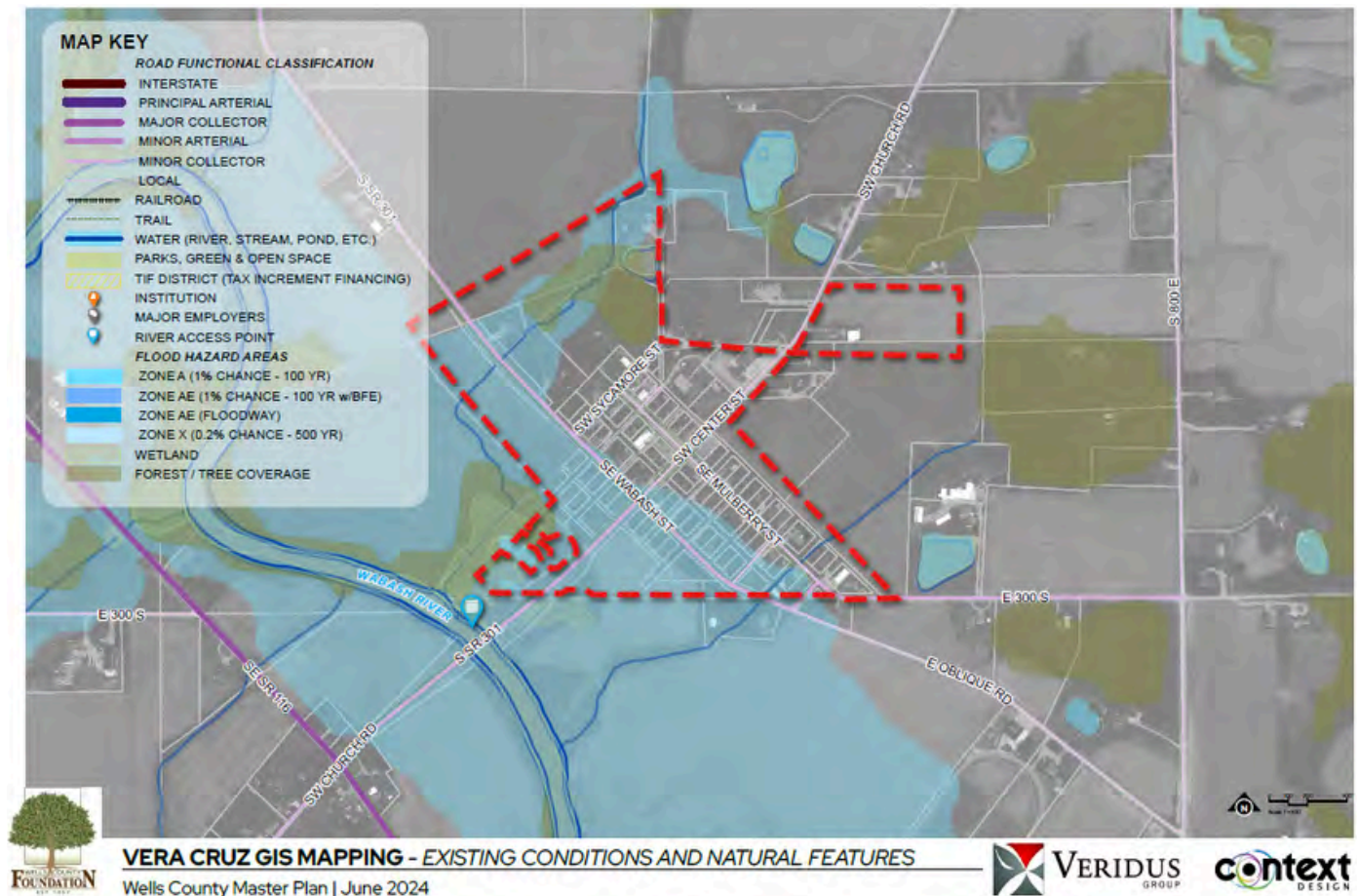


Figure 52: Vera Cruz Existing Conditions Map; Source: Context Design

Vera Cruz's transportation network and infrastructure provide access to regional destinations while supporting local connectivity. While the town does not have major highways, State Road 301 and local roads serve as the primary routes for residents and businesses. The proximity to the Wabash River has historically influenced development, but flood risks require strategic infrastructure investments.

- State Road 301 serves as the town’s main transportation corridor, linking Vera Cruz to the broader Wells County region.
- TIF districts (Tax Increment Financing) help encourage investment and redevelopment in strategic areas.
- Major employers and institutions contribute to Vera Cruz’s economic activity, though on a smaller scale than larger Wells County communities.
- Public utilities and infrastructure investments will be essential for maintaining service levels while addressing flood mitigation strategies.

Ensuring that transportation improvements, public services, and infrastructure investments align with growth opportunities and environmental constraints will be key to Vera Cruz’s future development.

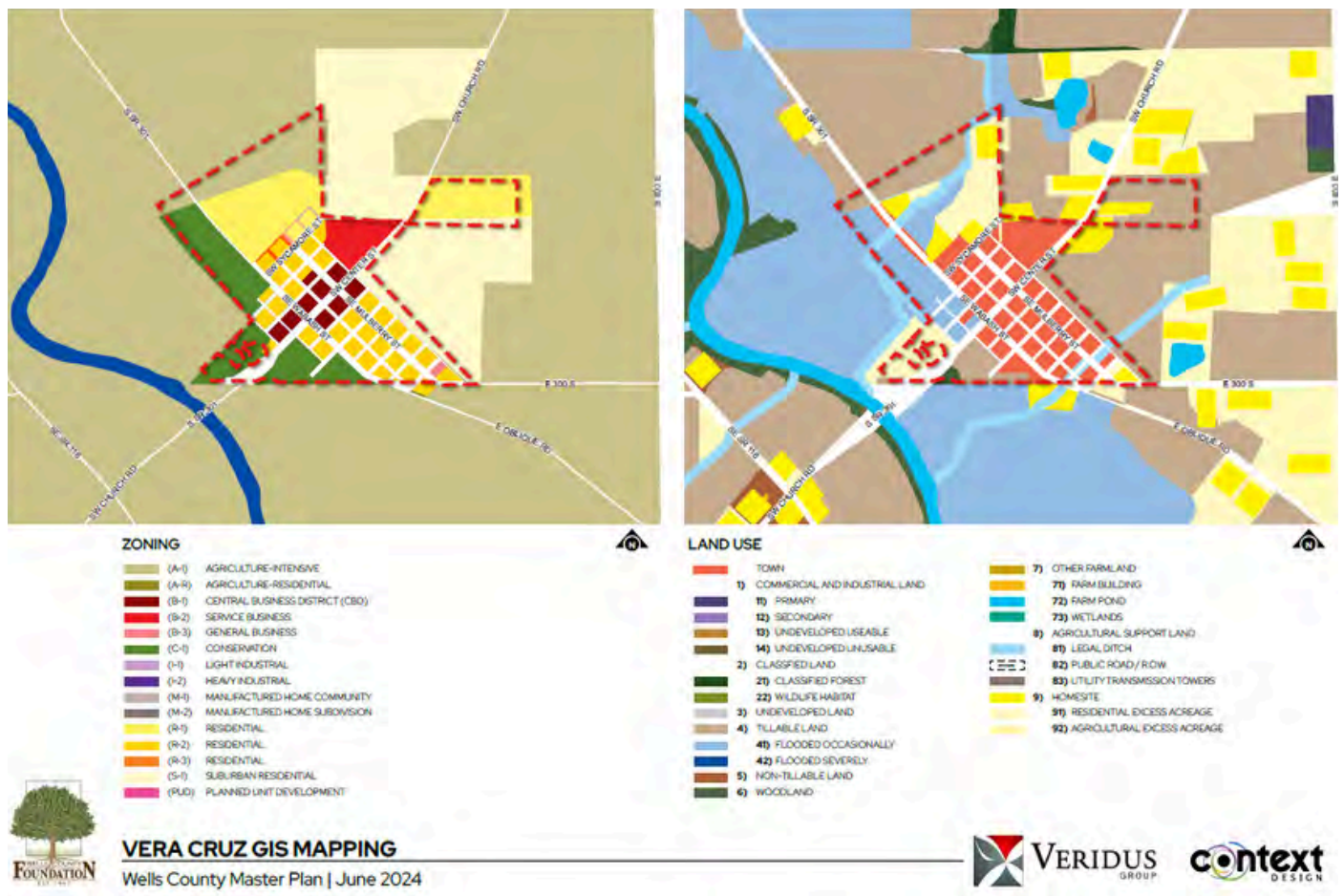


Figure 54: Vera Cruz Zoning and Land Use Map; Source: Context Design

Vera Cruz’s zoning structure and land use patterns reflect its small-town scale, with a compact core of residential and commercial development surrounded by agricultural land and conservation areas. The town’s zoning supports limited commercial growth while ensuring residential and agricultural uses remain primary land uses.



- Agricultural zoning (A-1, A-R) surrounds the town, reinforcing farmland preservation and limiting excessive urban expansion.
- Residential zoning (R-1, R-2, R-3, suburban residential) is concentrated in the town center, providing housing options for residents.
- Commercial zoning (B-1, B-2, Central Business District) is limited to the town's main corridors, allowing for small-scale retail and services.
- Conservation and floodplain areas limit development potential but play an important role in protecting the Wabash River's ecosystem.

The land use map highlights additional areas designated for undeveloped land, flood-prone zones, and agricultural uses, ensuring that future growth aligns with the town's rural character and environmental constraints.

Vera Cruz's existing conditions, land use patterns, and infrastructure assets provide a foundation for future planning that prioritizes sustainability and resilience. By maintaining a balance between residential growth, environmental preservation, and infrastructure investments, the town can continue to serve as a rural community that embraces its connection to the Wabash River. Strategic planning efforts will ensure that Vera Cruz remains a livable, flood-resilient, and historically significant town within Wells County.

## ANALYSIS OF VACANT PARCELS IN VERA CRUZ

The map highlights vacant parcels in orange, showing a dispersed pattern throughout Vera Cruz. The majority of these parcels are located within the central grid of the town, indicating infill opportunities, while a few larger vacant parcels are positioned along the eastern boundary, suggesting potential expansion areas.

Several parcels are near the main roads and water bodies, which may impact future development considerations. The overall distribution reflects a mix of small, undeveloped lots within the town core and larger vacant areas on the outskirts. When new development opportunities arise, it will be important to reference the Vision 2035 Plan in order to align future land use goals.

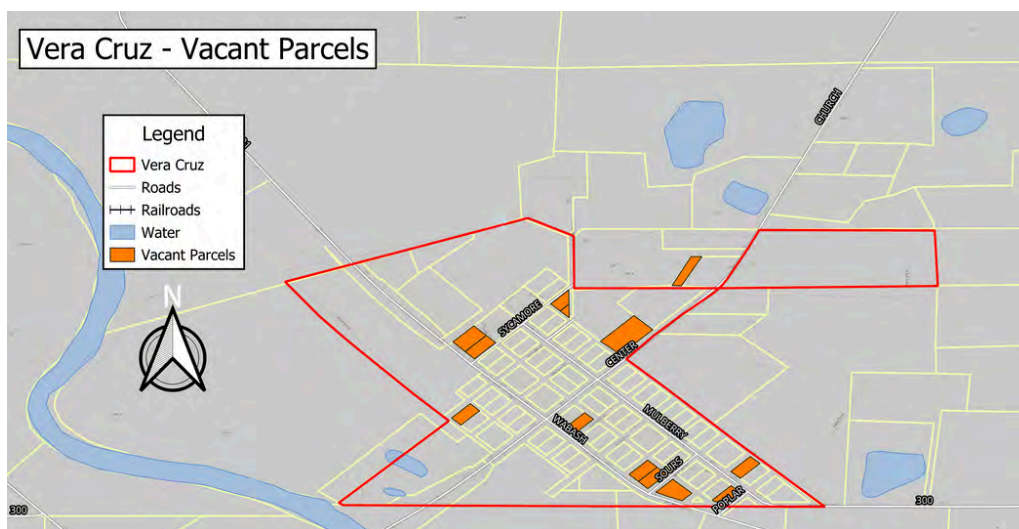


Figure 53: Vera Cruz Vacant Parcels Map; Source: Wells County GIS

# COMMUNITY MEETING

As part of the planning process, a community meeting was held in Vera Cruz to hear directly from residents about the town's current conditions, future opportunities, and local priorities. The discussion revealed a deep sense of pride in the town's small-town character, strong community ties, and access to natural resources like the nearby river and Ouabache State Park.

Participants shared aspirations for growth, such as adding a general store or new housing, while emphasizing the importance of maintaining Vera Cruz's safe, family-oriented atmosphere. Infrastructure challenges, particularly related to drainage, roads, and the aging sewer system, were recurring concerns. Attendees also brainstormed ideas for enhancing the local park, creating new trails, and drawing more families and small businesses to the area. The feedback collected during the meeting helped shape the following high-level SWOT summary.

## STRENGTHS

- Tight-knit, family-focused community with low crime and strong local relationships.
- Access to outdoor amenities: Ouabache State Park, the river, and a local park with a boat launch.
- Local pride in cleanliness and safety.
- Small number of existing businesses and a community church that draws people in.

## WEAKNESSES

- Poor road conditions, aging storm drainage, and high sewer bills (\$100/month).
- Floodplain limits development; FEMA restrictions reduce land use flexibility.
- Safety concerns: speeding, stop sign violations, and lack of a tornado siren.
- Town-owned property with limited use and minimal communication infrastructure.

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Add new housing and recruit young families.
- Develop underutilized lots—ideas included a general store, splashpad, and music venue.
- Revitalize the park and connect to the State Park via trails or a riverwalk.
- Establish a stronger brand identity ("Village of Vera Cruz") and host more community events.

## THREATS

- Blight risk from neglected junkyards, private properties, and vandalism near the river.
- Environmental risks from flooding and lack of drainage capacity.
- Increasing traffic and outsiders potentially disrupting community safety.
- Limited funding, leadership capacity, and communication with the county.

# FUTURE VISION

Vera Cruz's future vision is shaped by community feedback and environmental considerations, ensuring that growth, preservation, and infrastructure planning align with local priorities. Through surveys, public meetings, and stakeholder input, a set of vision principles has emerged, defining the town's direction for the future.

This section outlines Vera Cruz's vision principles, which emphasize sustainable land use, floodplain management, and public infrastructure investments. Given the town's proximity to the Wabash River, careful planning is needed to balance development with flood mitigation efforts while ensuring that residents have access to quality services and public spaces.

These principles will inform policies on land use regulations, infrastructure planning, and conservation efforts, ensuring that Vera Cruz preserves its rural charm while accommodating responsible growth. As these strategies are refined in the implementation section, Vera Cruz will continue to develop in a way that respects its natural surroundings and supports community well-being.

## VISION PRINCIPLES: TOWN OF VERA CRUZ

Vera Cruz will grow as a connected, family-friendly community that embraces its natural surroundings and small-town charm. By enhancing outdoor spaces, improving infrastructure, and supporting smart growth initiatives, the town will create a safe and welcoming environment for residents of all ages. These vision principles will guide Vera Cruz's future, ensuring thoughtful development that strengthens the community while preserving its unique character.



1

Enhanced Connectivity and Outdoor Emphasis

2

Safe, Modern, and Family-Friendly Community

3

Smart Growth and Revitalization

# FOCUS AREAS

Vera Cruz's Focus Areas focus on environmental sustainability, floodplain management, and infrastructure improvements to support the town's long-term growth. This section translates the town's vision principles into actionable strategies, ensuring that development is balanced with natural preservation.

Key growth priorities for Vera Cruz include:

- Managing land use in flood-prone areas to minimize environmental risks.
- Investing in stormwater infrastructure to enhance flood resiliency.
- Encouraging small-scale residential growth while preserving the town's rural character.
- Improving public infrastructure, including roads and utilities.
- Protecting green spaces and natural assets, particularly near the Wabash River.

The below map illustrates planned infrastructure projects and designated development areas, ensuring that Vera Cruz's growth is carefully managed. These Focus Areas will guide local decision-makers, helping them balance growth, conservation, and infrastructure investments.

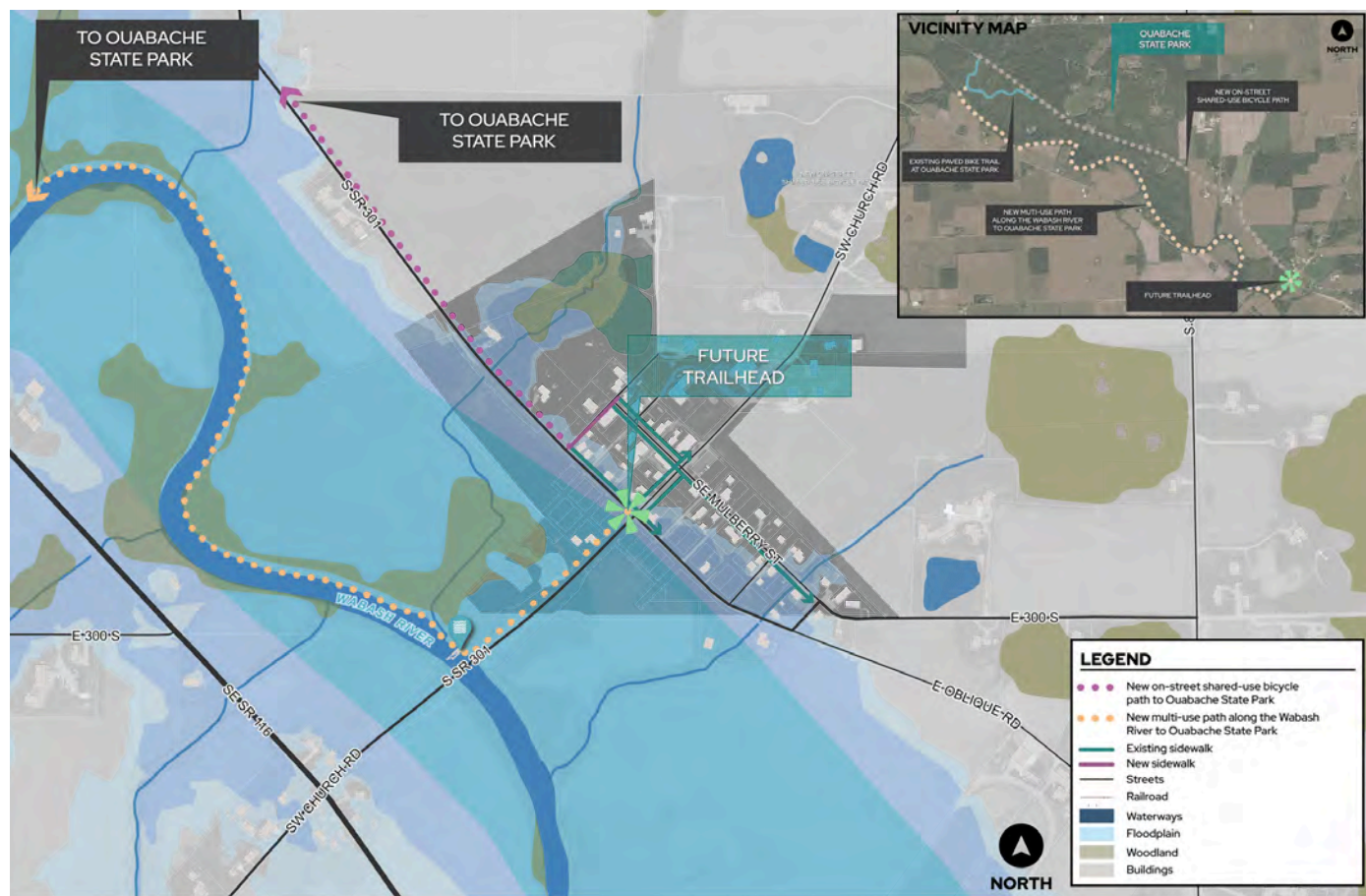


Figure 55: Vera Cruz Future Vision; Source: Context Design



Building on these priorities, Vera Cruz’s approach to growth is centered on environmental sustainability, floodplain management, and infrastructure improvements that align with the town’s rural character and natural assets. The map highlights key projects aimed at enhancing flood resiliency, expanding recreational connectivity, and improving public infrastructure.

A major focus of the map is the proposed multi-use path along the Wabash River, which will enhance access to natural areas while supporting sustainable land use near flood-prone zones. This connection also extends to Ouabache State Park, reinforcing Vera Cruz’s role in the regional trail network and outdoor recreation initiatives. Additionally, a future trailhead is planned within town, serving as a key access point for both residents and visitors.

To further support floodplain management and infrastructure resilience, the map outlines planned stormwater infrastructure investments that will help mitigate environmental risks and protect developed areas. These improvements are crucial in ensuring that Vera Cruz can accommodate future growth while minimizing flood-related challenges.

While the map focuses on green infrastructure and connectivity, Vera Cruz’s broader strategy includes small-scale residential growth, road and utility enhancements, and the preservation of natural spaces. By carefully balancing development with conservation, Vera Cruz is shaping a future that prioritizes sustainability, community well-being, and long-term resilience.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation framework for Vera Cruz ensures that community priorities are addressed effectively, supporting the town’s vision for sustainable development and infrastructure resilience. Through two detailed matrices, this framework provides clear guidance for growth and public investment.

The first matrix outlines each priority along with key objectives, identifying:

- Responsible Parties: Local government, infrastructure agencies, and funding partners.
- Potential Funding Sources: Grants, flood mitigation funds, and development programs.
- Cost: The estimated total cost for each strategy on a scale of \$ - \$\$\$\$.
- Priority Level: A ranking system to assist with project sequencing.
- Timeline: Estimated completion periods for maintaining progress.

The second matrix outlines specific action steps, ensuring that each goal is managed efficiently and leads to tangible results. These matrices will help Vera Cruz prioritize resources, address infrastructure challenges, and support balanced growth, ensuring that the town remains resilient and well-planned for the future.

## TOWN OF VERA CRUZ VISION 1

*Enhanced Connectivity and Outdoor Emphasis*

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Establish Vera Cruz as a gateway to Ouabache State Park by developing trails and pathways that connect the town to the park, fostering outdoor recreation opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends of Ouabache State Park</li> <li>• Wells County Trails</li> <li>• Wells County Tourism</li> <li>• Wells County Economic Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EDIT</li> <li>• General Fund</li> <li>• Grants</li> <li>• READI</li> </ul>	\$\$\$	High	18 - 24 Months, Ongoing
2	Support businesses that cater to outdoor lifestyles, creating a symbiotic relationship between the town's economy and the park's natural appeal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wells County Economic Development</li> <li>• Vera Cruz Elected Officials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Fund</li> <li>• EDIT</li> </ul>	\$\$	Medium	3 - 5 Years

**Vision 1, Strategy 1: Establish Vera Cruz as a gateway to Ouabache State Park by developing trails and pathways that connect the town to the park, fostering outdoor recreation opportunities.**

Objectives	Tactics
Develop Trail Connections to Ouabache State Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and secure land or easements needed to create a direct trail connection between Vera Cruz and Ouabache State Park.</li> <li>• Pursue grant funding and partnerships with state and local agencies to finance trail construction and maintenance.</li> <li>• Install wayfinding signage, trailheads, and rest areas to enhance accessibility and usability for hikers, cyclists, and outdoor enthusiasts.</li> </ul>
Enhance Outdoor Recreation Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a local trail system within Vera Cruz that links neighborhoods, parks, and key community areas to the state park connection.</li> <li>• Incorporate bike-friendly infrastructure, such as racks and repair stations, to encourage cycling as a primary mode of access to the park.</li> <li>• Partner with White River Canoe Company to explore opening a second location near Vera Cruz, offering rentals and guided river trips.</li> </ul>
Market Vera Cruz as a Gateway to Outdoor Adventure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create promotional materials and signage that highlight Vera Cruz as the ideal starting point for exploring Ouabache State Park and the Wabash River.</li> <li>• Partner with local businesses to offer trail- and river-related services, such as bike rentals, camping supplies, and canoe or kayak rentals.</li> <li>• Develop a visitor information hub in town featuring maps, park details, and recreation opportunities, including Wabash River access points and paddling routes.</li> </ul>

**Vision 1, Strategy 2: Support businesses that cater to outdoor lifestyles, creating a symbiotic relationship between the town’s economy and the park’s natural appeal.**

Objectives	Tactics
Attract and Support Outdoor-Focused Businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruit businesses such as outdoor gear shops, bike rental services, and camping supply stores that align with the recreational appeal of Ouabache State Park and the Wabash River.</li> <li>Offer tax incentives or grants for businesses that cater to outdoor tourism and recreation.</li> <li>Partner with White River Canoe Company or similar outfitters to establish a rental and tour service near Vera Cruz, providing canoe, kayak, and paddleboard options for visitors.</li> </ul>
Enhance Local Hospitality and Retail Offerings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage the development of cafés, diners, and lodging options that serve hikers, campers, and paddlers visiting the area.</li> <li>Work with local entrepreneurs to establish pop-up markets, food trucks, and seasonal retail stands that cater to outdoor enthusiasts.</li> <li>Develop a branding initiative that positions Vera Cruz as a gateway for adventure, highlighting its connection to the state park and Wabash River.</li> </ul>
Create Outdoor-Focused Community Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organize seasonal events such as trail races, fishing tournaments, and paddling excursions to draw visitors and support local businesses.</li> <li>Partner with Ouabache State Park to offer joint programming, such as guided hikes, nature workshops, and eco-tourism experiences.</li> <li>Develop an annual outdoor festival celebrating the town’s recreational assets, bringing together local businesses, vendors, and outdoor enthusiasts.</li> </ul>



## TOWN OF VERA CRUZ VISION 2

*Safe, Modern, and Family-Friendly Community*

	Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
1	Modernize the downtown park to enhance safety and appeal as a central hub for families and children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elected Officials</li> <li>Park Board</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General Fund</li> <li>Park Fund</li> <li>Grants</li> <li>Donations</li> </ul>	\$\$\$	High	18 - 24 Months
2	Improve public safety with traffic-calming measures to address speeding and ensure safe neighborhoods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elected Officials</li> <li>INDOT</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General Fund</li> <li>MVH</li> <li>CCMG</li> <li>Grants</li> </ul>	\$\$\$	Medium	2 - 10 Years
3	Invest in updated infrastructure, including sidewalks, roads, and drainage systems, to create a clean, accessible, and functional environment for residents and visitors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elected Officials</li> <li>INDOT</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General Fund</li> <li>MVH</li> <li>CCMG</li> <li>Grants</li> </ul>	\$\$\$\$	Low	2 - 10 Years

## Vision 2, Strategy 1: Modernize the downtown park to enhance safety and appeal as a central hub for families and children.

Objectives	Tactics
Upgrade Park Infrastructure for Safety and Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replace outdated playground equipment with modern, ADA-compliant structures to ensure a safe and inclusive environment for children.</li> <li>• Install new fencing, clear sightlines, and defined entry points to create a safer and more welcoming park layout.</li> <li>• Upgrade walking paths with smooth, durable surfaces and clear wayfinding signage to improve accessibility for all ages.</li> </ul>
Enhance Park Amenities to Attract Families and Visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add new picnic shelters, seating areas, and shade structures to create a more comfortable gathering space for families.</li> <li>• Install public restrooms and drinking fountains to improve convenience for park visitors.</li> </ul>
Activate the Park with Community Events and Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize seasonal activities such as movie nights, farmers' markets, and fitness classes to encourage year-round use.</li> <li>• Partner with local schools and organizations to host educational programs, sports leagues, and family-friendly events.</li> <li>• Create a volunteer-led "Friends of the Park" group to help with maintenance, beautification projects, and fundraising efforts.</li> </ul>

**Vision 2, Strategy 2: Improve public safety with traffic-calming measures to address speeding and ensure safe neighborhoods.**

Objectives	Tactics
Implement Traffic-Calming Measures in Key Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Install speed bumps, raised crosswalks, and curb extensions in residential areas and near parks to slow down traffic.</li><li>• Add clear and visible pedestrian crossings, especially in high-traffic zones, to improve safety for walkers and cyclists.</li><li>• Evaluate and adjust speed limits in critical areas to better reflect neighborhood safety needs.</li></ul>
Enhance Signage and Road Visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Upgrade street signs with reflective materials and better placement to improve visibility, especially at night.</li><li>• Install "Slow Down" and "Children at Play" signage in residential neighborhoods to encourage cautious driving.</li><li>• Add flashing warning signals at key intersections or near school bus stops to alert drivers to pedestrian activity.</li></ul>

**Vision 2, Strategy 3: Invest in updated infrastructure, including sidewalks, roads, and drainage systems, to create a clean, accessible, and functional environment for residents and visitors.**

Objectives	Tactics
Upgrade and Maintain Sidewalks for Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repair and replace damaged sidewalks to ensure safe and accessible pedestrian routes throughout town.</li> <li>• Extend sidewalks to connect key areas, such as parks, community spaces, and residential neighborhoods.</li> <li>• Install curb ramps and tactile paving at crossings to improve accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges.</li> </ul>
Improve Road Conditions and Traffic Flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resurface aging roads and fill potholes to create smoother and safer driving conditions.</li> <li>• Enhance street lighting in key areas to improve visibility and safety for pedestrians and drivers.</li> <li>• Establish a regular road maintenance schedule to ensure long-term infrastructure reliability.</li> </ul>
Enhance Drainage Systems for Flood Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean and maintain ditches, culverts, and storm drains to prevent flooding and water buildup.</li> <li>• Install or upgrade drainage infrastructure in areas prone to standing water or erosion.</li> <li>• Work with county and state agencies to secure funding for stormwater management improvements.</li> </ul>



## TOWN OF VERA CRUZ VISION 3

*Smart Growth and Revitalization*

Strategy	Responsibility	Funding	Cost	Priority	Timeline
Support moderate growth through single-family home development on larger lots and targeting commercial infill opportunities in the downtown area to address blight and vacant properties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elected Officials</li> <li>Park Board</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General Fund</li> <li>Park Fund</li> <li>Grants</li> <li>Donations</li> </ul>	\$\$\$	High	18 - 24 Months

**Vision 3 Strategy: Support moderate growth through single-family home development on larger lots and targeting commercial infill opportunities in the downtown area to address blight and vacant properties.**

Objectives	Tactics
Encourage Single-Family Home Development on Larger Lots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and rezone suitable areas on the town’s outskirts to accommodate new residential growth with spacious lots.</li> <li>• Partner with developers to promote home construction that aligns with the town’s character and resident preferences.</li> <li>• Improve infrastructure, including roads and utilities, to support future residential expansion while maintaining open space and rural appeal.</li> </ul>
Target Commercial Infill to Revitalize Downtown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop incentives, such as tax abatements or grants, for businesses to renovate or repurpose vacant downtown buildings.</li> <li>• Streamline the permitting process for commercial redevelopment projects to encourage investment.</li> <li>• Support mixed-use development that integrates retail, office, and residential spaces to create a more vibrant and active downtown.</li> </ul>
Address Blight and Vacant Properties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a property improvement program to assist owners in repairing and revitalizing neglected buildings.</li> <li>• Enforce property maintenance codes to encourage upkeep of vacant and underutilized sites.</li> <li>• Work with county and state agencies to secure funding for demolishing unsafe structures and preparing sites for redevelopment.</li> </ul>