

**Planning, Participation, and Public Trust:**  
**Evaluating the Parkside Reimagined Development Process**

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## Introduction

The debates surrounding the Parkside Partners tax-increment financing (TIF) proposal in West Branch, Iowa, provide a clear illustration of how small “dying” cities navigate the competing pressures of growth. Throughout 2024 and 2025, city officials sought to attract new housing and investment near the I-80 corridor, an area identified for redevelopment since the adoption of the Amended and Restated Urban Renewal Plan (City of West Branch, 2016). The Parkside Partners proposal emerged as one of the most contentious planning issues of the year. Local media reports and city council meetings have documented significant resident concerns, particularly regarding the stigmatizing language of the designation and its implications for neighborhood identity and amenities (West Branch Times, 2025).

The Parkside case underscores how planning decisions extend beyond technical land-use considerations. By applying frameworks of sustainability, equity planning, and communicative planning, I will evaluate whether the council’s decision advances the health, safety, and welfare of West Branch residents. I will also consider the political, fiscal, and procedural factors that influenced council deliberations and voting behavior. Through this analysis, the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of both the procedural dynamics and substantive implications of this significant planning decision.

This report traces the Parkside Partners TIF proposal from its origins through its final adjudication by the West Branch City Council. Drawing on staff analyses, planning documents, and direct observation of public meetings, it examines how the issue developed, how stakeholders framed their arguments, and how elected officials weighed the project’s potential benefits and risks. The October 6, 2025 City Council meeting, when the public hearing on the development agreement took place, served as a pivotal moment, revealing sharp divisions among

council members and residents regarding density, infrastructure costs, tax incentives, and long-term fiscal impacts (City of West Branch, 2025b).

## Background and History

The Parkside Partners TIF proposal emerged within a longer trajectory of planning, redevelopment, and fiscal strategy in West Branch, Iowa. The city has historically relied on its urban renewal framework to guide growth and encourage private investment, especially in areas near the I-80 interchange that have been targeted for redevelopment for over a decade (City of West Branch, 2016). This area has been repeatedly identified as a potential growth node due to its access to major transportation corridors, available land, and alignment with long-term economic development objectives (Figure 2).

In 2020, the city approved a rezoning of 401 Parkside Drive to Planned Unit Development (PUD), signaling an intention to accommodate flexible and higher-density development patterns in the corridor (City of West Branch, 2020) (Figure 1). Similarly, a 2022 hotel market feasibility effort demonstrated the city's interest in leveraging interstate traffic and expanding the local commercial sector (City of West Branch, 2022). These actions reveal a consistent effort to position the Parkside area as a future residential and

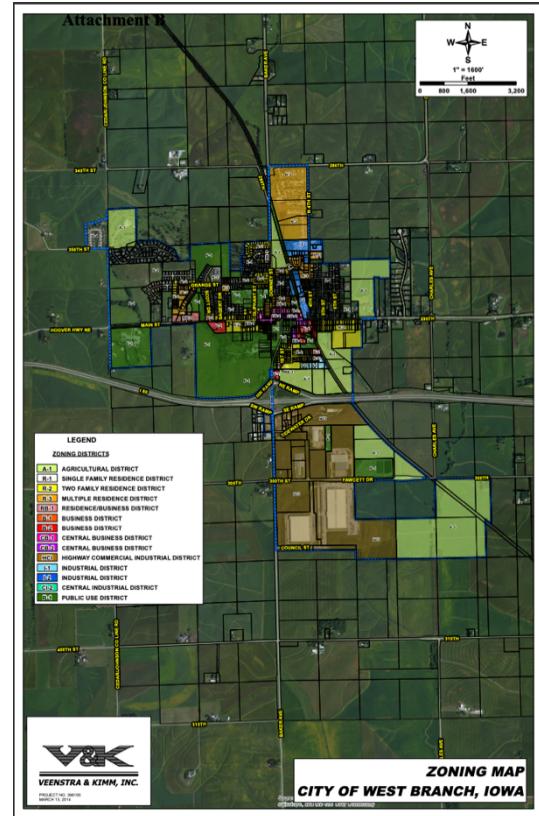


Figure 1. Zoning map of the City of West Branch, Iowa, showing municipal boundaries, zoning districts, and surrounding land uses. Source: City of West Branch Zoning Map, by Veenstra & Kimm, Inc., (2016).

commercial district, even as West Branch struggled to attract significant private investment without public incentives.

In early 2025, West Branch introduced Urban Renewal Plan Amendment Eight, which proposed expanding the urban-renewal area by designating portions of the east side as a “slum and blight” area (City of West Branch, 2025a) (Figure 2). Residents expressed concern that the label was stigmatizing and potentially harmful to property values.



*Figure 2. Selected areas associated with the Parkside Partners, LLC development proposal and nearby residential parcels designated within the “slum and blight” sub-area of the urban renewal district. Source: City of West Branch GIS (2025)*

This controversy created a charged political atmosphere prior to the consideration of the Parkside Partners proposal and heightened public scrutiny of any redevelopment activity associated with the urban renewal area. This act not only concerned residents, but city council members as well.

The Parkside Partners development initiative emerged later in 2025 as part of the city’s broader effort to promote housing growth and strengthen municipal finances. The developer proposed constructing approximately 200 multifamily rental units on land already envisioned for such uses in the Urban Renewal Plan and subsequent zoning actions (City of West Branch, 2016;

City of West Branch, 2020). Because substantial infrastructure improvements, such as roads, utilities, and stormwater management, were necessary to make the project viable, Parkside Partners requested a 75 percent TIF rebate for 20 years, structured as an annual appropriation agreement (City of West Branch, 2025b). City staff noted that the proposal was consistent with adopted planning documents and argued that TIF assistance would help catalyze housing supply that market forces alone were unlikely to produce (showing market failure and an acute housing problem). The city's limited fiscal reserve serves as an important factor in the reasoning behind signing a potentially bankrupting agreement. Council discussions referenced recent years with low levels of building permit activity, stagnant revenue, and budgetary constraints that limited the city's ability to invest in infrastructure or staff (City of West Branch, 2025b).

### **Description of Proposal**

The Parkside Partners proposal was first brought forward to the West Branch City Council in mid-2025, when the council set a public hearing on the development agreement through Resolution 2025-83 on July 21, 2025, followed by the formal scheduling of the hearing for August 18, 2025 through Resolution 2025-84 (City of West Branch, 2025c). The site had already been designated for multifamily housing under existing planning and zoning documents, so the question before the council was not whether the land use was appropriate, but whether the city should support the project through a TIF rebate structure intended to offset significant infrastructure and development costs (City of West Branch, 2025b).

Parkside Partners requested a 75 percent TIF rebate for twenty years, structured as an annual appropriation agreement in which the city would reimburse the developer with a portion of the tax increment generated by the new construction. Under the agreement, 75 percent of the

increased taxable value each year would be rebated to cover eligible project expenses, while the remaining 25 percent, along with all base-year taxes, would continue flowing to the city, county, and school district. Rebates are issued only after valuation increases are realized, meaning the proposal will function as a reimbursement mechanism rather than an upfront subsidy. The development itself consists of approximately 200 multifamily rental units, accompanied by internal roads, parking areas, stormwater facilities, and necessary water and sewer extensions.

The financing plan also incorporates Iowa Workforce Housing Tax Credits (IWHTC), which improves project feasibility by reducing overall development costs. City staff concluded that the agreement complied with Iowa's urban-renewal statutes, aligned with the goals of the city's Urban Renewal Plan, and imposed no upfront financial obligation on the city, ultimately recommending approval based on the project's projected long-term benefits to the city's housing supply and tax base (City of West Branch, 2016; City of West Branch, 2025b). The proposal advanced to a final vote on October 6, 2025, where the West Branch City Council approved the development agreement on a 3–2 decision (Norfleet, 2025).

## **Stakeholder Analysis**

The Parkside Partners TIF proposal drew involvement from a broad set of stakeholders whose interests, concerns, and levels of influence shaped the public debate and the ultimate decision of the West Branch City Council. Although the development agreement was primarily a financial and administrative decision, its implications for housing and property values, infrastructure, and neighborhood character made the issue meaningful to residents, elected officials, city staff, and the developer.

The first major stakeholder was Parkside Partners, the private developer who had originally proposed the development. Their primary interest was project feasibility and economic gain. The developer argued that the substantial infrastructure needs to meet subdivision bylaws and city code could not be financed through private investment alone, making the 75 percent, 20-year TIF rebate essential to moving forward. Parkside Partners also positioned the project as a response to local housing demand and as a long-term benefit to the city's tax base. Their willingness to allocate a portion of their WHTC to the city further reflected a strategic interest in securing council support (Norfleet, 2025). With that said, Parkside Partners is a private company looking to maximize their profits, and its pursuit of the TIF agreement reflects a rational effort to reduce financial risk and secure a return on investment (placing significant risk onto the city).

The West Branch City Council formed the second major stakeholder group, as its members were responsible for evaluating the development agreement and determining whether it aligned with the city's planning and fiscal priorities. Each council member brought their own professional experience and perspective on municipal governance to the process. During the meetings I observed, council members asked questions and engaged with both the developer and residents to understand the proposal's implications. Their varied backgrounds and levels of experience influenced how they interpreted the project's significance for West Branch, and their deliberations played a central role in guiding the proposal toward a final decision.

Another stakeholder in this decision was the City Staff. Their role involved evaluating compliance with Iowa TIF statutes, ensuring consistency with the Urban Renewal Plan, and presenting the development agreement in a way that clarified both risks and benefits. Staff emphasized that the project required no upfront city expenditure, that rebates would occur only after a new taxable valuation was created, and that the development aligned with previously

established land-use goals (City of West Branch, 2025b). Staff motivations were rooted in statutory due diligence, administrative efficiency, and the long-term value of housing expansion.

The strongest and most vocal stakeholder group consisted of local residents, particularly those living near the Parkside Drive and Elm Street corridors. Residents expressed concerns about traffic volumes, road capacity, emergency access, stormwater impacts, and perceived threats to neighborhood character. Several residents also rejected the implications of the “slum and blight” designation, arguing that it unfairly stigmatized the area and might damage property values significantly. Their testimonies during the public hearing illustrated fears about rapid population influx, density, insufficient green space, and the proportionality of the proposed TIF incentive. Some residents indicated support for potential commercial amenities the development might eventually attract, such as a grocery store, but maintained that the residential portion was too intense for the location and surrounding uses (Norfleet, 2025).

Other stakeholders operated more indirectly, not having an explicit presence at city council meetings. The West Branch Community School District and Cedar County, while not active participants at the meeting, stood to be affected significantly by the TIF’s diversion of a portion of property tax. Their interests lie in stable or increasing tax revenues to support public services (funding for the school districts).

Collectively, the stakeholder landscape reflects the tension between community-scale concerns and citywide development goals. The developer and a portion of the council prioritized growth and long-term fiscal recovery, while residents and dissenting council members emphasized neighborhood impacts, procedural fairness, and the value of incremental rather than rapid change. City staff functioned as intermediaries, grounding the discussion in regulatory compliance and answering questions. The city did not advertise any explicit stakeholder

meetings, making the allotted “public hearing” sessions during council and Planning and Zoning Commission meetings the closest thing to a stakeholder group/meeting. In addition to regular council meetings, the city convened an August 14, 2025 special work session focused on the Parkside Hills/Parkside Reimagined plan, where the mayor, council members, staff from multiple departments, the developer, the project engineer, and some community and commission members discussed project impacts, infrastructure capacity, and design revisions (City of West Branch, 2025d).

### **Meeting Observations**

When I attended the West Branch City Council meeting on October 6, 2025, I observed firsthand how differently each group understood the Parkside Partners development agreement. City staff opened the discussion with a clear explanation of the proposed TIF structure. They emphasized that the agreement operated as a reimbursement rather than an upfront subsidy and stated that it complied with Iowa’s urban-renewal statutes and the city’s long-standing planning documents (City of West Branch, 2025b). Staff focused almost entirely on technical and procedural points, and I noticed that their presentation avoided taking a position beyond confirming that the proposal met legal and policy requirements.

The tone shifted noticeably during the public hearing. Three residents spoke, and their comments revealed concerns that extended far beyond the financial mechanics of TIF. I heard residents describe the proposed development as too dense for the Elm Street and Downey Street corridors and express fears that traffic circulation, emergency access, and public services would not keep pace with the influx of new residents. One resident read a letter warning that the city was not prepared for the additional strain on water capacity, the food pantry, medical services,

police, fire protection, and the school district (Norfleet, 2025). I could sense the residents' frustration and anxiety about how the project might alter the character of West Branch.

I also noticed that the earlier "slum and blight" designation strongly influenced how residents interpreted the TIF request. Although the designation was legally tied to Urban Renewal Plan Amendment #8 and not the Parkside agreement itself, residents repeatedly brought it up as a sign that the city was willing to mischaracterize their neighborhood to justify redevelopment (City of West Branch, 2025a). One resident said she now lived in a place labeled a "slum," and described fears about property values and neighborhood identity. These concerns were exacerbated further when a man who lived on Elm Street raised many concerns about property values decreasing. These comments made clear to me that negative procedural decisions taken months earlier shaped a lack of public trust during this meeting.

Council deliberations reflected the same divide I witnessed during public comment. Council Members Tom Dean, Jerry Sexton, and Colton Miller spoke in favor of the agreement and framed the project as a necessary step toward reversing years of slow growth. Dean described periods when West Branch issued no building permits and fell into financial strain, and I could see how those experiences shaped his belief that new housing was essential for fiscal stability. Supportive members also pointed to the developer's offer to share WHTC with the city, arguing that the rebate's effective cost to the city was lower than it appeared (Norfleet, 2025). The WHTC promise by Parkside Partners agreed to give half of its \$1 million in Workforce Housing Tax Credits to the city. With those factored in, the TIF drops to 48 percent.

Council Members Mike Horihan and Jodee Stoolman took the opposite stance. It was evident that both were unconvinced by the scale of the rebate and the density of the project.

Horihan rejected the earlier “slum and blight” label and argued that the area was simply undeveloped, not deteriorated. Stoolman questioned the length of the 20-year incentive and echoed residents’ concerns about traffic circulation and green space. Both emphasized the need for greater transparency and a more cautious approach to growth. There was a great amount of animosity funneled toward Stoolman, and what seemed like personal attacks from City Administrator Adam Kofoed.

When the council finally voted, the chamber felt tense. The development agreement passed on a 3–2 split, with Dean, Sexton, and Miller voting in favor and Horihan and Stoolman voting against (Norfleet, 2025). After it passed, audible remarks were made by Stoolman in the form of what can be described as a sigh of disgust, as well as by some of the residents present at the meeting. The split vote struck me as a clear reflection of the broader divisions I observed throughout the evening. While staff and the developer presented the project as a strategic investment in West Branch’s future, many residents and two council members viewed it as a risky investment that could compromise infrastructure capacity and neighborhood quality. The meeting made it evident to me that the final decision reflected differing visions for the city’s growth.

### **Analysis Using Planning Theory**

As I analyzed the Parkside Partners decision through the lens of planning theory, I found that several frameworks from our course offered important insight into the tensions that emerged during the public process. The meeting I attended made clear that the debate was not simply about financing mechanisms or zoning compliance; it reflected deeper conflicts about power, participation, equity, and competing visions of how a community should grow (or die).

I first considered the case through Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation. Residents who spoke at the October 6 meeting clearly wanted meaningful influence over the development's scale, traffic impacts, and use of TIF, yet the structure of the process offered them only minimal power. Although the city held a public hearing and a prior work session, the final decision still rested entirely with the council, and residents' concerns, particularly about density, infrastructure capacity, and the earlier "slum and blight" designation, did not materially change the agreement. In Arnstein's terms, participation in this case fell somewhere between "Consultation" and "Placation," where citizens can speak but cannot directly shape outcomes. This mismatch between participation and influence likely contributed to the frustration I heard from the public.

From the perspective of communicative planning, particularly Healey (1992) and Huxley (2000), the meeting revealed a disconnect between official procedure and meaningful dialogue. While communicative theory calls for planners to help stakeholders build shared understanding, the city focused on procedural compliance, framing the issue in technical and legal terms. Residents, however, framed their concerns around lived experience, neighborhood character, and future impacts. Because these perspectives never converged, the meeting produced parallel statements rather than genuine deliberation. This dynamic connects directly to Molotch's (1976) "urban growth machine," which I saw reflected in the council's emphasis on economic development, tax-base expansion, and the fiscal need for new housing. The developer and supportive council members formed a growth-oriented coalition, while residents raised concerns about density, infrastructure strain, and community identity. Together, these theories explain why the conversation remained fragmented and why pro-growth arguments ultimately carried the most influence.

Krumholz's equity planning approach also helped me interpret the dynamics I observed. Krumholz (1982) argues that planners and public officials should prioritize the interests of those with the least power and the most to lose from planning decisions. When I apply that lens to the Parkside Partners case, I see a process that did not fully consider the burdens residents feared. Although staff framed the project as fiscally responsible and the council majority emphasized long-term economic gains, these benefits were distributed broadly across the city, while the immediate costs would fall on the adjacent neighborhoods. From an equity planning perspective, the council could have taken a more deliberate approach to addressing residents' concerns or exploring alternatives that balanced growth with community protection. In this sense, the decision favored economic efficiency over equity, reflecting a gap between Krumholz's call for redistributive planning and the city's growth-oriented priorities.

### **Why Did the Council Vote the Way It Did?**

West Branch operates under a mayor–council form of government, where the elected City Council holds the primary authority to approve budgets, development agreements, and tax-increment financing arrangements. The mayor may influence the discussion, but the decision ultimately rests with the five council members. Because of this structure, individual council members' priorities, experiences, and interpretations of the city's needs significantly shaped the 3–2 vote on the Parkside Partners agreement.

At the time of the Parkside Reimagined vote, the council included members with very different levels of experience: Dean and Miller each had over a decade of intermittent service (Norfleet, 2025; West Branch Times, 2023), Sexton had served for about six years (West Branch Times, 2023), Stoolman is serving their first term, running for a second in the November 2025

election (Cedar County Elections, 2024), and Horihan was in his first term with less than two years on the council (West Branch Times, 2023).

The split vote ultimately reflected the division within the council between members prioritizing citywide fiscal growth and those emphasizing local impacts and procedural consistency. The mayor does not have a vote except in the case of a tie, and because staff can only recommend rather than decide, the outcome came down to how each council member individually balanced long-term development goals against residents' concerns. The 3–2 result demonstrates how even a small shift in priorities among council members can determine the city's direction on major development decisions that can make a significant difference in the quality of life and the general well-being of the city.

### **Was the Decision in the General Well-Being of Society?**

Based on what I observed throughout the Parkside Reimagined process, I do NOT believe the council's final decision served the general well-being of society. While the project may expand West Branch's tax base in the long term, the decision placed disproportionate burdens on nearby residents and city services without adequately addressing their concerns. The project also does not guarantee a positive return on investment, at the expense of the tax-payers. General concerns were not speculative and had already been acknowledged by the City. Yet the development agreement moved forward without any meaningful modifications to mitigate those impacts.

The council's approval also raised questions about procedural fairness. The earlier "slum and blight" designation, although technically separate from the TIF agreement, created a sense of distrust among residents, and I noticed that the city never fully repaired that breach. For many

residents, the designation signaled that the city prioritized financial tools over community dignity. The decision also carries clear equity implications. While supporters emphasized long-term revenue growth, the immediate impacts fall almost entirely on the existing community near Parkside Drive and Elm Street. Meanwhile, the financial benefits are distributed broadly across the city. This imbalance suggests that the burdens and benefits of the project are not shared equitably. From an equity standpoint, the council did not take enough steps to protect the residents most affected by the development, nor did it fully explore alternatives or phased approaches that could have eased the transition.

Additionally, the size and duration of the TIF rebate raise concerns about fiscal responsibility. A 75-percent rebate for twenty years shifts significant opportunity costs onto future budgets. Even with the developer's contribution of Workforce Housing Tax Credits, the agreement commits future councils to reduced tax revenues during a period when the city already faces infrastructure pressures. In my planning opinion, committing to such a large incentive without clearer safeguards or a more comprehensive infrastructure plan does not promote long-term community well-being and instead is a risky investment. For these reasons, I do not believe the city's decision fully advanced the general well-being of society. The council prioritized growth and fiscal optimism over the concerns of its citizens, approving a development agreement that leaves many of the most pressing public concerns unresolved.

## Conclusion

Following the Parkside Reimagined proposal from its introduction to the final council vote allowed me to see how planning decisions unfold at the local level and how competing visions for a community shape the outcome. The debate in West Branch revealed deep tensions

between growth-oriented goals and the concerns of citizens. Although the development agreement aligned with existing planning documents and promised long-term fiscal benefits, the process did not adequately address the infrastructure pressures, equity concerns, and trust issues repeatedly raised by residents. The narrow 3–2 vote reflected this divide, with the council majority prioritizing economic expansion and the minority emphasizing community impacts and procedural fairness. In the end, the city’s decision advanced a particular vision of growth but left important questions about participation, equity, and long-term public welfare unresolved. Observing this process reinforced for me how essential it is for local governments to balance development opportunities with transparent decision-making and genuine engagement to ensure that planning serves the entire community, not just the “urban growth machine”.

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