

SALEM, OHIO

FIVE-YEAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN

A Shared Vision for Our Little Big City



2026-2031

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Kaitlyn Kline is an independent consultant and researcher holding an MSc in Social Research Methods from the London School of Economics, with a background in community development and graphic design.

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Prepared by the Sustainable Opportunity Development Center in collaboration with the City of Salem, over 600 community members, and 40 local and regional stakeholders.



SALEM, OHIO

FIVE-YEAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN

2026-2031

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Whether you are a longtime resident, a business considering Salem as your next home, a potential investor or grant partner, or someone exploring Salem's work through research and regional collaboration, this plan reflects a community that has been moving forward with purpose.

Five years ago, the SOD Center released Salem's first Five-Year Economic Development Plan with a simple but powerful belief: that steady collaboration, honest assessment, and shared effort could move our community forward.

Today, it's clear that belief was well placed.

Over the past five years, Salem has made real and measurable progress. Downtown vacancies have dropped dramatically, new businesses have opened, buildings have been reinvested in, and long-standing bottlenecks have been reduced. We have secured millions in competitive grants, improved permitting timelines, expanded workforce training opportunities, invested in infrastructure, and strengthened Salem's visibility across the region. Just as importantly, we have seen a shift in sentiment—more people describing Salem as a place that is improving, welcoming, and moving in the right direction.

None of this happened by accident, and none of it happened alone. Progress came through collaboration between residents, employers, city leadership, nonprofits, businesses, and regional partners who chose to stay engaged and committed to Salem's future. The SOD Center is grateful to be part of that shared effort.

As we reflect on what has been accomplished, it is equally important to acknowledge what remains unfinished. Progress has brought clarity. We now better understand where capacity gaps exist, where investment is most urgently needed, and how interconnected economic development truly is—housing, workforce, transportation, quality of life, and opportunity all moving together or not at all. These realities shaped the development of the 2026–2031 Economic Development Plan.

This plan is both a roadmap and an invitation. It builds on our momentum, grounded in expanded community input from over 600 voices, and outlines practical, achievable actions for the next five years. It is intentional about supporting what is already working—our industrial base, downtown revival, healthcare infrastructure, and workforce training—while squarely addressing the challenges that will define our future competitiveness.

What is most exciting about this moment is not just the plan itself, but the growing interest in Salem. When progress becomes visible, people want to be part of it. We are seeing that renewed energy from entrepreneurs, employers, former residents, developers, and community advocates alike.

As you read this plan, I encourage you to see it as a living document and to see yourself in its future. Whether you are a resident, business owner, employer, investor, educator, developer, or community partner, there is a role to play in shaping what comes next. Engagement matters. Progress depends on shared responsibility through participation, partnership, ideas, investment, and ongoing conversation. This plan will only succeed if it continues to be informed by the people it is meant to serve.

The path forward will require continued partnership. It will require patience and persistence. But if the last five years have shown us anything, it is that Salem knows how to do hard work, and how to do it together.

Thank you for believing in this community, for investing your time, talent, and trust, and for helping shape a future that is already taking form. I am deeply excited about what comes next, and even more grateful for the people who will help bring it to life.

With appreciation and optimism,

Julie L. Needs
Executive Director
Sustainable Opportunity Development Center, Inc.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the generous time, insights, and lived experiences shared by a wide group of stakeholders across the Salem community and the Northeast Ohio region broadly.

We are deeply grateful to the residents, business owners, community leaders, public servants, developers, neighbors, and volunteers who contributed their perspectives through hours of interviews, discussions, and surveys.

We also want to acknowledge the organizations and individuals tirelessly working to support Salem's continued progress and development. While we all recognize the ongoing work and collaboration needed going forward, it is remarkable how much has been accomplished and the successes over the last 5, 10, and 15 years deserve to be celebrated.

A very special thanks to all 593 individuals who completed the survey, sharing their experiences, knowledge, and insights. Their contributions are central to the solutions this report explores.

Lastly, we would like to recognize our project partners, collaborators, and contributors who helped shape the direction of this work, as well as those who reviewed and provided feedback during its development. Special thanks to the following individuals, who shared with us their time and expertise:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first Five-Year Economic Development Plan for the City of Salem, Ohio was developed in 2020 and released in 2021 by the Sustainable Opportunity Development (SOD) Center. That initial report provided a framework that has informed not only the SOD Center's goals, programs, and operational strategies, but also collaborative efforts around Salem.

Recognizing the value of an informed and centralized plan, the SOD Center embarked on developing this new Five-Year Economic Development Plan in early 2025, drawing on the successes and learnings of the previous plan.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

This Five-Year Economic Development Plan provides a clear, actionable strategy to guide the City of Salem's economic growth from 2026 through 2031. Prepared by the SOD Center in partnership with the City of Salem, the plan is intended to align public, private, and philanthropic organizations around shared priorities that strengthen Salem's economy and improve quality of life for all residents, businesses, and visitors.

The purpose of this report is threefold. First, it assesses Salem's current economic conditions using updated data and substantially expanded community input. Second, it reflects on progress made since the previous economic development plan, identifying both successes and ongoing barriers. Third, it outlines targeted recommendations designed to be adaptable, measurable, and achievable within this next five-year timeframe.

While no plan can predict the specific conditions the next five years will bring, this document offers a durable framework for coordinated action; one that is flexible enough to evolve while grounded in Salem's strengths, needs, and long-term goals.

SUCCESS OF THE LAST PLAN

- Salem climbed from 84th to 12th among top 100 U.S. micropolitan areas (Business Journal, 2025).
- The city remains one of the most affordable areas nationally, with housing costs 17.2% below and healthcare costs 20.1% below the national average (C2ER, 2025).
- Downtown vacancies reduced by 77% over the past five years (SOD Center Data, 2025).
- Building permit timeline reduced from ~6 months to an average of 6 days (Business Journal, 2025).
- \$2.3 million gained in competitive grants for downtown rehabilitation (SOD Center Data, 2026)

Report was sponsored by the SOD Center in collaboration with an independent researcher and the City of Salem, OH.

12TH

Salem's place among the top 100 U.S. metropolitan areas.

77%

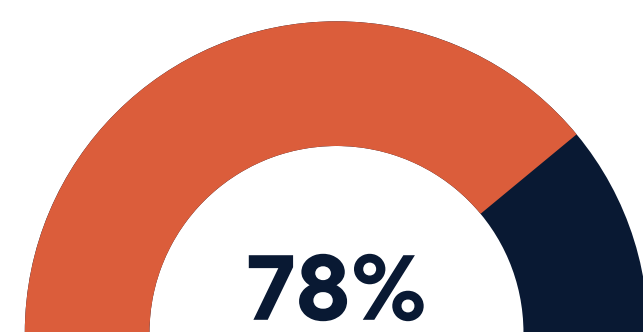
Downtown vacancy reduction in the past five years.

\$2.3M

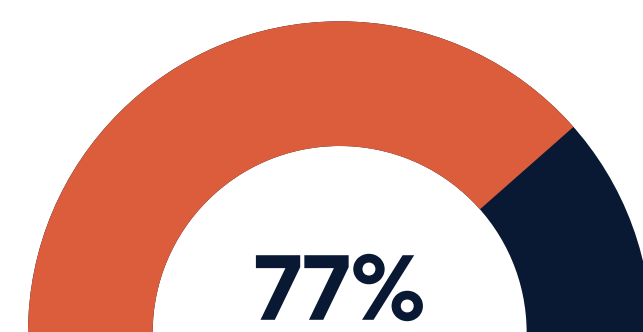
Competitive grants for downtown rehabilitation.

SALEM'S MOST POPULAR ASSETS

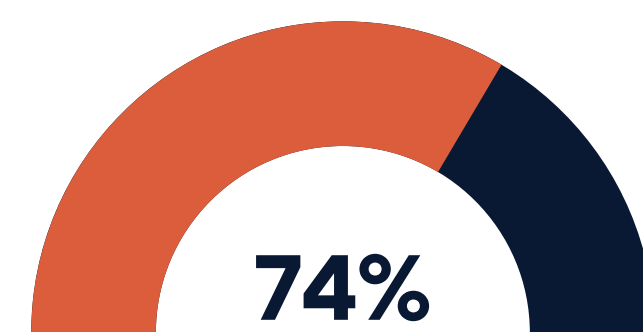
Assets survey respondents selected as either "meets expectations" or "exceeds expectations" on the Salem Growth Survey (2025).



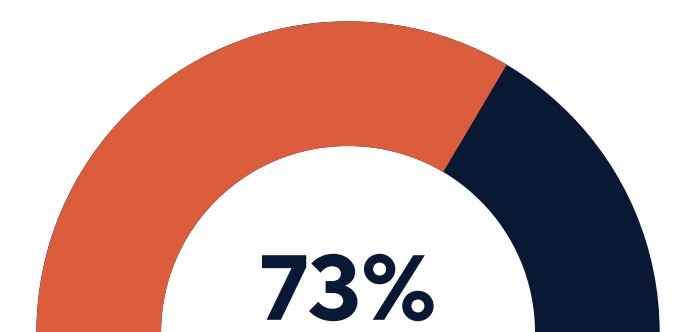
The Public Library



Walkability



Service Clubs



Parks and Recreation

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Methodologically, this 2026–2031 plan differs from the previous effort in both scale and depth of engagement. Input was gathered through a combination of stakeholder interviews, facilitated discussions, and a community-wide survey that saw broader participation from the local community and regional neighbors.

- Nearly 600 residents, visitors, and stakeholders participated in the survey made available to the public both online and in print during an 8-week period in the summer of 2025. This represents a 142% increase in the number of responses received in 2025 versus the 2019 survey conducted to inform the 2021 Five-Year Economic Development Plan.
- More than 40 stakeholders were interviewed across 12 sectors of the local and regional economy including developers, small business owners, city administrators, and life-long leaders in the Salem community, among many others.

This mixed methods research process provided a robust public comment to inform strategic goals and operational priorities. For more specifics about research methodology, see the section titled Summary of Expanded Community Input or Appendix A.

KEY INSIGHTS

Preliminary analysis of stakeholder input highlights several core themes:

- **Salem's Growth and Improvements:** Stakeholders emphasized the great work that has already been done in Salem to strengthen key sectors of employment, support small business growth and development, and address downtown attractiveness for residents and visitors.
- **Capacity and Resources:** There is a clear need for sustained funding, staffing capacity, and resource support to enhance administrative and infrastructure improvements that would attract and strengthen local economic activity.
- **Collaboration and Partnerships:** Priorities for the next five years should be addressed collaboratively alongside local organizations, businesses, and city leaders to ensure long-term success and shared community support.

The community and stakeholder insights included throughout this report guide the development of actionable strategies, including programmatic focus areas, partnership frameworks, and performance metrics.

SUMMARY

for decision makers

Salem, Ohio is a community demonstrating how renewed dedication can lead to community-wide change. As discussed throughout the report, over the past five years, the city has reduced downtown vacancies by 77%, secured more than \$2.3 million in competitive grants for downtown rehabilitation, paved 163 roads, reduced building permit timelines from an average of six months to six days, and climbed from 84th to 12th on the list of top 100 micropolitan areas in the United States (SOD Center Data 2025, 2025 Levy Renewal Handout, Business Journal 2025, C2ER 2025). These are documented results, achieved through deliberate investment and sustained partnership between the City of Salem, the SOD Center, and a broad coalition of community organizations, employers, and residents. This plan is built on that foundation. Yet, as stakeholders and community respondents noted, we must be clear-eyed about what remains unfinished.

PRIORITY AREAS FOR 2026–2031

The chapters that follow provide a detailed analysis of Salem's economic landscape across ten sectors. For decision makers, the most urgent and interconnected priorities are:



Manufacturing and Site Readiness: Salem's industrial base remains its strongest economic engine, employing a greater share of residents than any other sector. Approximately 65 acres within the Salem Industrial Park have completed environmental testing. Attracting and expanding the manufacturing and industrial sectors of Salem's economy remains a priority. This is discussed in more detail in

➡ **Chapter 2, Manufacturing and Industry.**



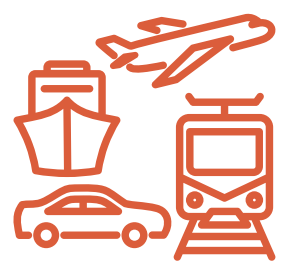
Downtown Revitalization and Walkable Spaces: Downtown Salem has experienced genuine and visible transformation over the past five years, with new businesses, upper-floor renovations, and the expansion of a Designated Outdoor Refreshment Area (DORA). However, downtown revitalization remained the second highest community priority in the 2025 Salem Growth Survey, selected by 15% of respondents among a list of ten options (Question 11). Sustaining the momentum of previous years requires continued attention to building standards and code enforcement, filling remaining vacancies, expanding residential density downtown, and managing the State Street traffic conditions that currently undercut the walkable environment the city is working to build. Read more about this in ➡ **Chapter 4, Downtown.**



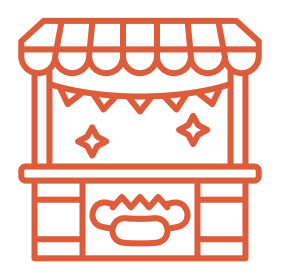
Commercial and Retail Recruitment: In 2024, the SOD Center invited Retail Strategies to conduct an opportunity-gap analysis, which identified more than \$305 million in annual unmet consumer demand across key categories including food service, building materials, furniture, and home goods (Retail Strategies, 2024). In the community survey, retail ranked as the top priority for the next five years, with 16% of respondents selecting it. When asked specifically, 60% of respondents said shopping options "need improvement", while 38% said restaurant options "need improvement" (Salem Growth Survey 2025). This is discussed in more detail in ➡ **Chapter 5, Commercial and Retail.**



Housing Supply and Diversity: Salem faces a projected shortfall of approximately 316 housing units by 2030, and the gap is not just in quantity but in housing type (Aterio 2026). Middle housing for young families, professionals, and seniors looking to downsize is currently underdeveloped in Salem. Housing availability was one of the most consistent themes raised by stakeholders and survey respondents, not just as a concern in and of itself, but as a barrier to workforce recruitment and retention as well as a priority to support our aging population. Read more in ➡ **Chapter 6, Housing.**



Transportation, Road Safety, Parking, and Multi-Modal Mobility: Salem's road network has seen meaningful investment, with 69.8% of city streets paved since 2015 and the levy renewed by voters in May 2025 to continue that work. But transportation in Salem is also a daily challenge for the roughly one in four households that either own just one car or own no car at all (U.S. Census, 2020). Addressing transit gaps, improving pedestrian infrastructure, and managing truck traffic on State Street are priorities that connect directly to workforce access, downtown vitality, and quality of life for Salem's vulnerable and elderly residents. Read more in [Chapter 8, Transportation.](#)



Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events: The city's lodging tax revenue reached \$95,347 in 2024 (Ohio Department of Taxation), driven by a growing event calendar that includes Freed Fest, the Salem Super Cruise, and an expanding roster of community-driven programming. What is missing is the coordination infrastructure: a unified brand identity, dedicated marketing capacity, reliable visitor data systems, and wayfinding tools that help visitors navigate what Salem has to offer once they arrive. This is discussed in more detail in [Chapter 10, Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events.](#)

THE PATH FORWARD

Taken together, the priorities, recommendations, and findings across this report make clear that economic development in Salem cannot be addressed through business attraction and expansion alone. Housing, workforce education, infrastructure capacity, and quality of life are all deeply interrelated economic issues. Addressing them together strengthens Salem's ability to compete regionally, retain residents, and attract new investment.

The recommendations outlined in this plan are designed to move from ideas to implementation, prioritizing actions that build upon existing momentum, address known bottlenecks, and leverage partnerships across the city, the SOD Center, employers, institutions, and community organizations. The opportunity ahead is to translate Salem's affordability, workforce connectivity, and regional role into measurable economic progress by aligning strategy, investment, and collaboration around a shared vision for the next five years.



I'm really excited about this renewed interest in Salem. Whether it's for businesses, home ownership, community involvement in our downtown, or coming to see what we have.

*- Cyndi Baronzzi Dickey
Salem City Mayor*

INTRODUCTION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN TODAY'S CONTEXT

At the local level, economic development is not limited to business attraction alone. It encompasses the conditions that allow businesses to grow, workers to stay, families to settle, and investment to flow into the community. Employment opportunities, housing availability, infrastructure capacity, workforce readiness, transportation access, and quality of life all interact to shape economic outcomes. This approach reflects how people and businesses make location decisions today. Employers consider whether workers can find housing. Families evaluate affordability, schools, and amenities. Workers assess commute times, wages, and quality of life. Addressing these factors together strengthens Salem's economic foundation and supports long-term resilience.

Community input collected for this plan reinforces the importance of this broader economic development framing. Stakeholders consistently identified housing availability, marketing and events planning, infrastructure capacity, transportation access, and quality of life as factors that directly influence Salem's economic competitiveness regionally.

As a result, this plan treats these elements not as secondary considerations, but as critical components of a thriving local economy. This approach builds on, but also modernizes, the framework used in the previous 2021 Economic Development Plan for the city of Salem.

A few key concepts to create a shared understanding:

Cost of Living Index: A comparative statistical measure that quantifies how much income is required to maintain a given standard of living in one location versus another, typically based on prices for essential goods and services such as housing, food, transportation, and healthcare. An index above 100 indicates higher costs compared to the baseline, while below 100 indicates lower costs.

Quality of Life: A multidimensional concept reflecting individuals' well-being and satisfaction with their living conditions, encompassing both objective factors (like income, housing, safety, jobs, healthcare access) and subjective perceptions about comfort, happiness, and life satisfaction.

Talent Attraction and Retention: A set of strategies and conditions that enable a region or employer to draw in qualified workers and keep them engaged in jobs and the community over time. Attraction and retention efforts must focus not only on wages and job opportunities, but also factors such as community appeal, quality of life, career pathways, and feelings of inclusion (OECD, 2024).

Underemployment: A labor market condition in which individuals are employed in roles that do not fully utilize their skills, education, or experience, or that provide fewer hours or lower wages than desired. This may include involuntary part-time work or employment below a worker's qualifications and can indicate gaps between available jobs and the workforce's capabilities.

Workforce Availability: The extent to which a labor market has an adequate supply of workers with the skills, competencies, and readiness to fill existing and future job openings. In a workforce planning context, availability typically considers both the quantity and quality of labor supply relative to employer needs.

COLUMBIANA COUNTY'S COST OF LIVING INDEX IS 90.5

Source: C2ER Report 2025.

PROGRESS UNDER THE 2021-2026 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Salem's prior Five-Year Economic Development Plan, encompassing 2021-2026, established a focused agenda for growth and investment. It identified key strengths, outlined measurable goals, and provided a roadmap for coordinated action among the city, the SOD Center, and community partners. During that period, the city and its partners made meaningful progress across several fronts, even as broader economic conditions changed with the COVID-19 Pandemic and accompanying challenges.

Over the last five years, Salem has demonstrated a clear resilience through its ability to move projects forward, attract investment, and collaborate across sectors.

Key accomplishments include:

- In May 2025, voters approved the **renewal of the 0.25% income tax for street and sidewalk improvements** for another five years. This allows Salem to continue investing in roads, walkways, and storm sewage infrastructure, positioning the city to support future growth. (Salem News, 2025)
- The **annexation of 19.5 acres of land** from Perry Township in 2024, allowing the expansion and growth of local employer, Fresh Mark (Salem News, 2024).

- Salem has focused on **expanding and upgrading the industrial park** to meet growing business demand, with key steps including city-funded wetland and geotechnical studies to assess developable acreage and support grant-ready infrastructure planning.
- Salem's historic downtown has seen a significant revival and a reduction in vacancies as **dozens of new businesses** have opened in the past five years, including boutiques, specialty shops, a music shop, a bicycle shop, new restaurants, and a soda fountain (WKBN 2023, Business Journal, 2023).
- The **launch of a local commercial building department** in 2023, managed by Elevate Building Solutions in partnership with the SOD Center, the City of Salem, and the City of Columbiana, has improved permitting wait times from roughly six months to an average of six days (Business Journal, 2023).

These accomplishments matter not only for their immediate impact, but because they demonstrate Salem's capacity to plan, partner, and deliver results.

ONGOING STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Not all priorities advanced at the same pace. Several goals from the prior plan encountered structural or capacity-related barriers. Economic development planning is not a one-time exercise. In some cases, progress requires coordination beyond local control or is dependent on market conditions that could not be adjusted.

Importantly, the challenges that reduced progress are not unique to Salem. Resource constraints, administrative capacity, and external forces are pressures faced by many small and mid-sized communities competing for residents, employers, and investment within a regional and national economy. Acknowledging these realities allows this plan to focus on strategies that are both ambitious and achievable.

THE PATH FORWARD

Workforce demographics are shifting, housing preferences are changing, and competition among communities for residents, employers, and investment has intensified. At the same time, Salem’s relative affordability, location within a regional labor market, and quality of life advantages present meaningful opportunities for growth. Reflecting on the previous five-year plan alongside this broader framework for economic growth and development, there are a few key learnings:

First, coordination matters. Progress was strongest where roles were clearly defined and where the city, the SOD Center, and partners were aligned around shared objectives.

Second, the bounds of economic development are evolving. Community feedback underscored that challenges related to housing availability, education, mobility, and quality of life directly affect business growth, workforce retention, and investment decisions.

Third, capacity and sequencing are critical. Some initiatives stalled not because of lack of vision, but because prerequisite conditions, such as site readiness, infrastructure upgrades, or staffing, were not yet in place.

Salem enters the 2026–2031 planning period with a stronger understanding of its assets, constraints, and opportunities. The remainder of this report translates analysis and community input into clear findings and practical recommendations. Each sector-specific section outlines current conditions, identifies challenges likely to affect Salem over the next five years, and proposes actions designed to move the community forward.

Taken together, these recommendations are intended to be ambitious yet achievable. They require continued collaboration among the City of Salem, the SOD Center, employers, institutions, and residents. Progress will depend not on any single organization, but on sustained shared effort, making this plan both a roadmap and an invitation.



SUMMARY OF EXPANDED COMMUNITY INPUT

INTRODUCTION

Increased community consultation and inclusion was a priority for the SOD Center during the development of the 2026-2031 Economic Development Plan and report. Early conversations between SOD leadership and the consulting researcher focused on efforts to expand participation in both the survey and stakeholder interviews.

Planning conversations focused on marketing more broadly and extending invitations beyond those consulted during the previous planning period for the 2021-2026 Economic Development Plan. The Salem community responded overwhelmingly, with hundreds of residents providing thoughts, comments, and perspectives that became foundational to the considerations and recommendations included throughout this report.

The expansive qualitative research process provided a robust public comment to inform strategic goals and operational priorities throughout the remainder of the report. Analysis of findings, summaries, and explicitly stated requests from respondents not only informed, but drove the final set of recommendations included in this report. Among these included requests for new retail offerings, improved housing oversight, and dedicated marketing and wayfinding for the city, all persistent themes followed by innovative solutions that emerged during community consultation.

Research and data analysis was led by Kaitlyn Kline, an independent research consultant with an MSc in Social Research Methods from the London School of Economics.

THE COMMUNITY SURVEY: METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

593 individuals participated in the 2025 Salem Growth Survey that was made available digitally and in-print for an 8-week period during the summer. A sample of this size provides a high degree of confidence that a representative range of community perspectives are present within the data (Groves 2009).

Survey recruitment was voluntary and non-random, relying on marketing via social media, promotions in downtown shops, and coverage in the local newspaper. Efforts were successful at reaching a broad cross-section of the community. **Participation in the 2025 survey was 142% higher** than the 2019 survey, but also far more varied demographically in terms of age, income, educational attainment, and sector of employment.

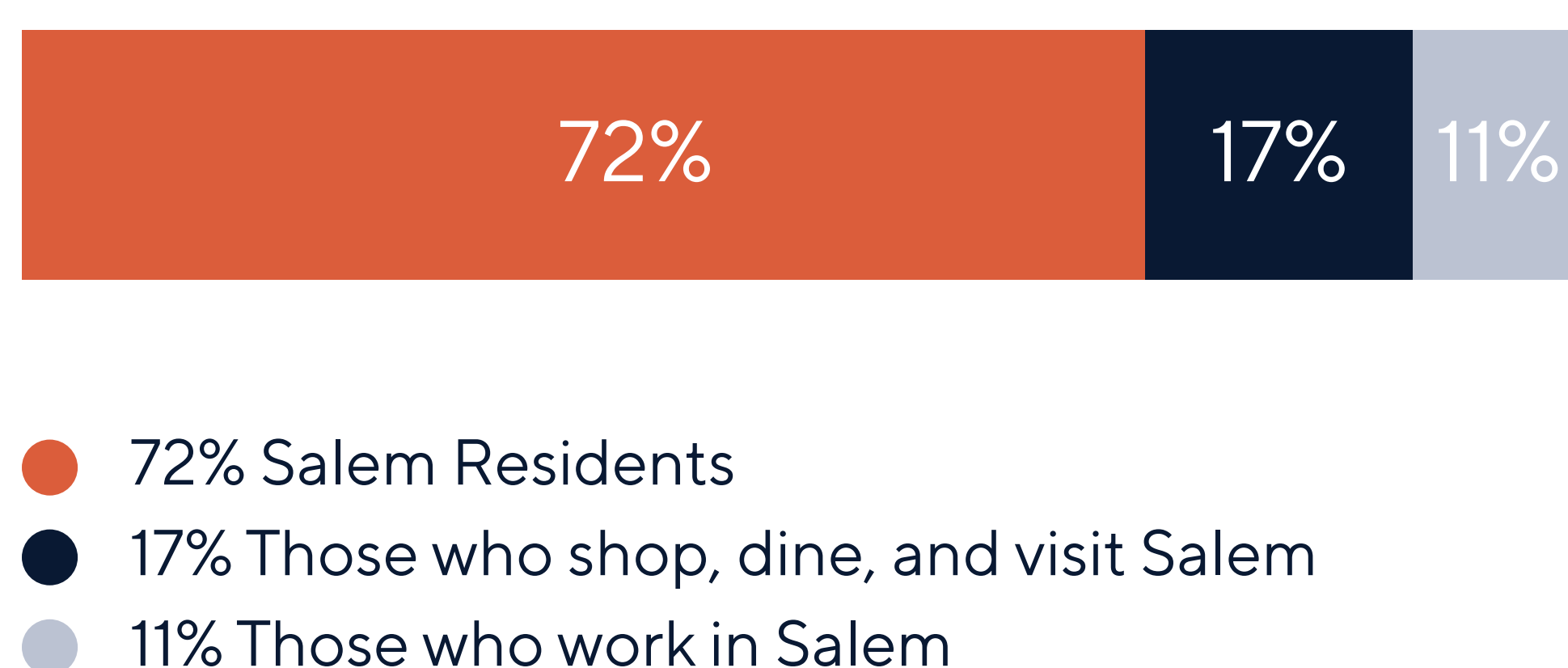
Though some groups were over-sampled, including women and those with higher education, analysis weights were applied after data collection to reduce discrepancies and match the sample data to reflect a representative sample of Salem residents (Groves 2009).

Participation was incentivized through an enter-to-win random prize drawing where six \$50 gift cards to local businesses were offered to winners by the SOD Center. Responses were collected anonymously and 82% of respondents completed the survey entirely, well above an industry standard completion rate of 68% (Survey Monkey 2025). Given the increased participation and high completion rate, it is highly

likely the prize drawing contributed to the success of the 2025 survey.

This mix of perspectives offers valuable insight not only into how Salem residents view their community, but also how it is perceived by those who contribute to its local economy and social fabric (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Survey Participation



STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUPS: METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

More than 40 stakeholders were interviewed, representing dozens of key sectors across the local and regional economy, including developers, small business owners, city administrators, and civil servants in the Salem community, among others. These conversations invited participants to reflect on the past five years of Salem’s growth and consider how the SOD center, city leadership, and members of the community could come together in the next 5 years towards a shared vision of Salem’s future.

Twelve groups of stakeholders were consulted. These groups included local and regional representatives from:

- 1) Manufacturing
- 2) Healthcare and Hospital Administration
- 3) Assisted Living and Senior Care
- 4) Professional Services
- 5) Restaurants
- 6) Retail and Small Businesses
- 7) Education and School Management

- 8) City Departments
- 9) City Administration
- 10) Volunteer and Economic Development Organizations
- 11) City Councilors
- 12) The SOD Center Board of Directors

Audio was transcribed using a mix of automatic and manual transcription by the lead researcher. Interviews were then coded with a mix of deductive and inductive coding in an iterative manner to allow central themes to emerge (Deterding and Waters 2021). These themes, the relationships between them, and the interactions between members of various stakeholder groups were then analyzed using thematic analysis, a typical methodology for this form of qualitative, stakeholder-led data (Braun and Clark 2021).

THE RESULTS FROM COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

The results presented in this section synthesize insights from both the 2025 Salem Growth Survey and extensive stakeholder focus groups to provide a comprehensive picture of how community members experience Salem today and how they envision its future.

Together, these inputs reveal not only areas of consensus, but also important nuances between perceived citywide priorities and individual lived experiences. The findings reflect a community that is increasingly optimistic about Salem’s trajectory, while remaining clear-eyed about persistent challenges and unmet needs. This section highlights key patterns, shifts over time, and emerging priorities that informed the strategic direction of the 2026–2031 Economic Development Plan and serve as a foundation for the recommendations that follow.

For more information about the methodology behind the research see Appendices A, B, and C.

Priorities for Growth Beyond Traditional Economic Development Boundaries

Across the community survey and stakeholder interviews, respondents consistently framed Salem's future not just in terms of economic growth, but through a broader lens of livability, community, and long-term sustainability. Six interrelated themes emerged most strongly:

- **Housing**
- **Retail and Local Businesses**
- **Downtown Revitalization**
- **Marketing and Tourism**
- **Activities for All Ages**
- **Opportunities to Improve Coordination**

While each of these areas is explored in more depth in subsequent chapters, several cross-cutting findings from the community data are particularly instructive for shaping the city's five-year strategy.

Bridging the Gap Between Community and Personal Challenges

A notable dichotomy emerged between the challenges respondents identified for Salem as a whole and those they experience personally. While community-level concerns were often centered on downtown vitality, retail options, and economic opportunity, individual challenges more frequently related to mobility, finding community, aging in place, and affordability.

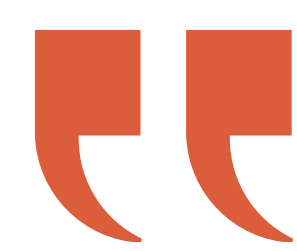
This gap demonstrates a disconnect between how community-level priorities are articulated and how residents experience daily life in Salem, but it also invites more innovative approaches to economic development —ones that integrate green spaces, community gathering opportunities, events, and age-friendly infrastructure alongside traditional growth strategies. Investments that improve everyday quality of life can simultaneously address individual challenges while strengthening Salem's long-term attractiveness as a place to live, work, and visit.

A Holistic Vision for Economic Attraction and Retention

Community members are thinking holistically about what makes Salem competitive, and they expect the city's strategies to do the same. Survey responses and interviews frequently linked tourism, marketing, wayfinding, education, job opportunities, and overall quality of life as mutually reinforcing priorities. Respondents highlighted the need to attract and retain new families, expand housing options, develop senior living, and improve afterschool programs for working parents, underscoring that workforce development and population growth are inseparable from family-friendly services and amenities.

Collaboration as a Core Requirement

Particularly during stakeholder discussions, there was broad recognition that Salem's five-year plan cannot be realized by any one sector or actor alone. Respondents pointed to perceived silos in the work, gaps in collaborative efforts, and underutilized assets, particularly in marketing and tourism. Moving forward will require intentional collaboration across public, private, and nonprofit partners, leveraging policy changes, private development, coordinated grants, and shared programming. A more unified approach can help maximize limited resources while improving visibility and impact.



We have many organizations in Salem that are working in silos, and they need to come together and say 'hey, you can help us with this, you can help us with that'. I believe we could realize substantial benefits if we collaborate.

*– Audrey Cleveland Null
Executive Director of Salem High
School Alumni Association*

Resource Constraints and Capacity Gaps

Across sectors, stakeholders shared that current funding and staffing levels are unsustainable in the long term. Concerns included limited capacity to pursue competitive grants, staffing shortages among safety forces particularly during events, and reliance on taxes and levies that still fail to meet annual budgetary needs for city services or auxiliary, unplanned expenses. These constraints reinforce the importance of coordination, shared services, and strategic prioritization to ensure that efforts are scalable and resilient over time.

Additionally, respondents noted limited accessibility of city departments, a lack of shared or centralized space, and outdated administrative infrastructure. While current city leadership has begun to address these challenges, progress is constrained by limited resources and institutional capacity. These administrative and operational gaps are explored in greater detail in Chapter 9, City Administration and Public Services.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overall, the community consultation process confirmed and reinforced many of the themes already identified by the SOD Center and the city of Salem as priorities for development by 2031. Retail, housing, and downtown revitalization all stood out as expected top themes. The findings and recommendations offered in survey responses were taken together with themes and priorities that emerged from stakeholder interviews to create a collective and shared vision for Salem's future, which the rest of this report will explore.

The expanded community consultation process underscores a pivotal moment for Salem. Residents, workers, business owners, and stakeholders recognize and value the progress made over the past five years, yet they are also calling for a more coordinated and expansive approach towards community growth moving forward. These perspectives align closely with

the goals outlined in the introduction of this report and reinforce the need for strategies that advance economic vitality alongside quality of life.



All of these amazing entities are facing real funding shortages. They're facing major infrastructure issues as the people who have done the work within them age or retire, and we are struggling to find people to do them to the same level of excellence.

*– Austin Fredrickson, M.D.
Salem Regional Medical Center*



OVERVIEW OF SALEM IN 2026

INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1806, Salem is a city of ~11,883 people located in Columbiana County, Ohio (U.S. Census 2020). Historically, the Salem community has been home to many inspiring and notable individuals, among them Alan Freed, who coined the term “rock and roll”; Charles Burchfield, a celebrated 20th century painter; and Daniel Howell Hise, an abolitionist whose home served as a stop along the Underground Railroad (Ohiohistory.org 2026).

The legacy of the community in and around Salem lives on in the people who call the city home. However, like many small industrial cities across the country, Salem has faced significant challenges over recent decades as economic shifts and changes in industry have required the community to adapt, reinvent, and look forward.

Today, Salem serves as a regional employment and commercial hub for Columbiana County and its surrounding communities. The county's approximately 100,000 residents, along with workers and shoppers drawn from neighboring Mahoning, Carroll, and Stark counties, represent a substantial and loyal consumer base that supports Salem's manufacturing, healthcare, and commercial retail sectors. This regional role gives Salem an economic footprint that extends well beyond its city limits and underscores the importance of continued investment in its infrastructure, workforce, and business climate.

Salem's cost of living is one of its most tangible competitive advantages. With a cost-of-living index of 90.5 in 2025, residents pay meaningfully less than the national average for housing, healthcare, and everyday goods, a genuine asset for residents and workers in a regional market where affordability is increasingly rare (C2ER 2025).

Population of Salem:

11,883 people

Population of Columbiana County:

~100,000 people

Salem's Median Household Income:

\$50,250





SALEM'S REGIONAL POSITION

Although Salem is not a hub for intermodal traffic, there is one active railroad spur serving the downtown industrial area. Through the port at Wellsville, Salem has reasonable access to barge transport on the Ohio River. Major highways surrounding Salem include I-76/I-80 (the Ohio Turnpike), I-77, Ohio Route 11. US Route 30 requires minimal travel to access.

Geographically, Salem sits ~160 miles from Columbus, ~60 miles from Cleveland, ~40 miles from Akron, and ~70 miles from downtown Pittsburgh. Other regional neighbors such as Youngstown, Boardman, and Canton are within a 30-mile drive. Furthermore, Salem offers access to four major airports: Pittsburgh

International Airport, Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport, and Akron-Canton Airport, as well as several ports including Ohio River Ports and Lake Erie.

This key regional position offers companies and residents in the community the convenience of the broader interconnected infrastructure of Northeast Ohio and West Pennsylvania while maintaining the affordability, community life, and historic charm characteristic of a small town.

INCENTIVES FOR DEVELOPMENT

Salem's economic development ecosystem is supported by a diverse coalition of organizations including the SOD Center, Salem Area Chamber of Commerce, and the Downtown Salem Partnership.

As a community, Salem is committed to supporting local development of housing, downtown businesses, and new industrial initiatives. Aligned with these goals, the city offers many incentives and tools for support for any new ventures seeking to develop or expand in Salem. Available development tools and incentives include:

Community Reinvestment Area (CRA) Tax


Abatement: The City of Salem has established a Community Reinvestment Area covering most commercially zoned areas within the city. The CRA allows property owners who build new structures or make qualifying improvements to existing ones to receive a full or partial exemption on the increase in their property's taxable value. For new construction of residential, commercial, or industrial structures, Salem offers up to 15 years of abatement. Remodeling existing single- and two-family homes qualifies for a 10-year abatement on improvements of at least \$2,500; multi-family and commercial or industrial renovations of at least \$5,000 qualify for up to 12 years (SOD Center, 2026).

Tax Abatements: Beyond property tax tools, the City of Salem offers several income-tax based incentives administered through the SOD Center. The Job Creation Incentive returns up to 55% of annual city withholding taxes to employers who relocate or create net new jobs in the city, for up to five years, with downtown businesses eligible for up to 100% back in the first year. The Net Profit Tax Incentive offers similar terms for new startups or businesses relocating to Salem, returning up to 55% of annual city net profit taxes for up to five years. For businesses at risk of closure or downsizing, the Business Acquisition & Growth Incentive can return up to 100% of the annual city net profit tax to employers who maintain or grow their workforce over a three- to five-year period (SOD Center, 2026).

SOD Center Workforce Development Training: The SOD Training Center provides businesses in the region with access to professional workforce development and hands-on training. Offerings include industrial technical certifications through the NC3 (National Coalition of Certification Centers) program covering areas such as fluid power and hydraulics, electricity (AC/DC), sensor technology, and programmable logic controls (PLC), as well as leadership development, Microsoft Excel, GD&T (Geometric Dimensioning and Tolerancing), and soft-skills training.

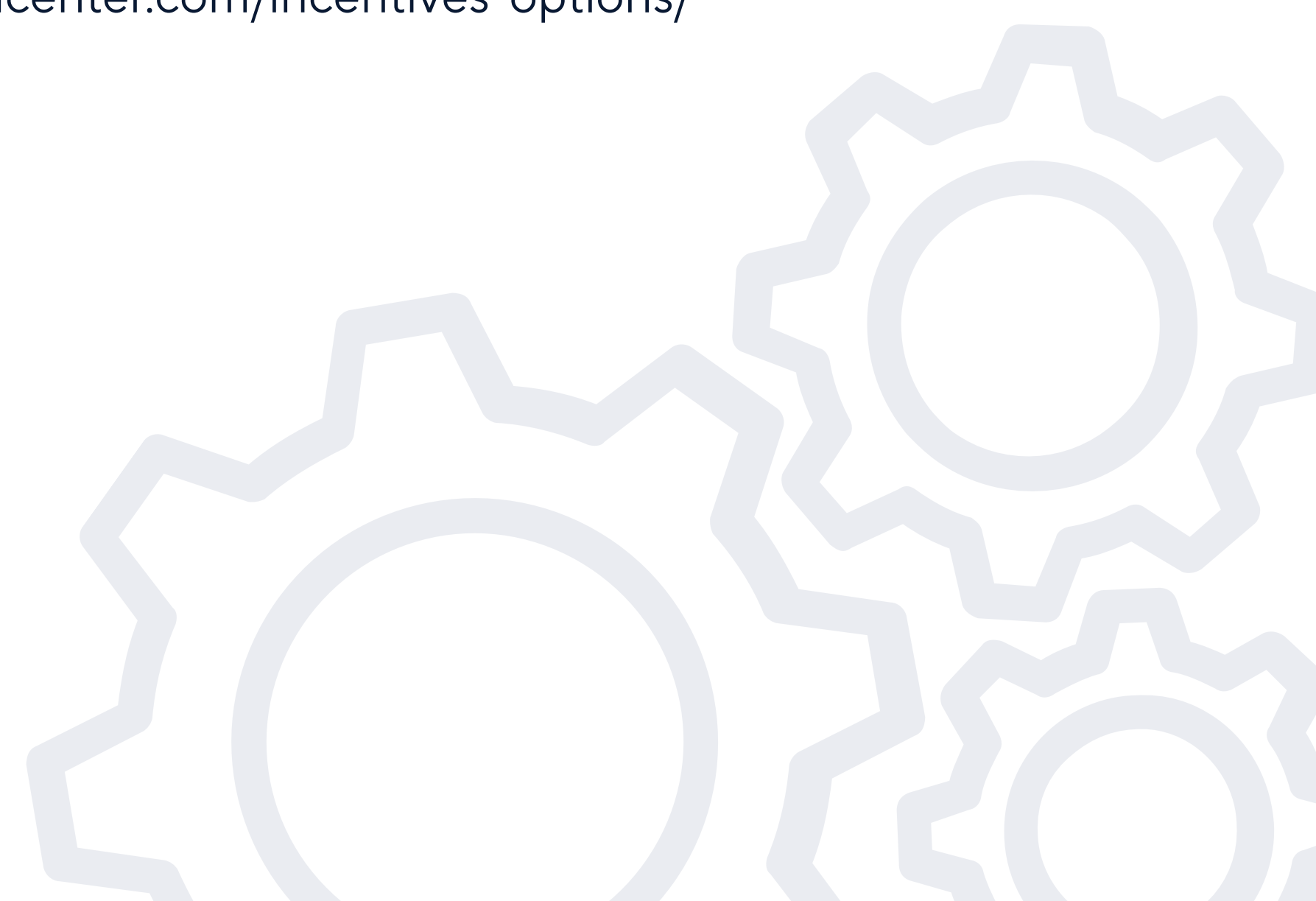
Commercial Building Permit Services via Elevate Building Solutions:

In 2023, the City of Salem established a local commercial building department through a contracted third-party service model designed to overcome long-standing capacity and cost challenges. Operating an independent, state-compliant building department was not financially viable for Salem alone, and earlier efforts to secure external providers did not result in a workable solution. To remove this barrier, the SOD Center developed a scalable operational model in which Elevate Building Solutions, LLC functions as a third-party provider specializing exclusively in commercial building department services, operating under contract for Salem and other communities in the region. Under this structure, Elevate operates the Salem Building Department for commercial projects, providing plan review, permitting, inspections, and code enforcement services. This structure has allowed Salem to offer dedicated, professionally focused commercial expertise while significantly reducing approval timelines and improving consistency, responsiveness, and predictability for developers and businesses operating in the city.



**LEARN MORE
ABOUT SALEM'S
INCENTIVES**

Connects to: www.sodcenter.com/incentives-options/



DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Local Labor Force

Salem has long been an industry-based economy, shaped by its location between Cleveland and Pittsburgh and its history as a manufacturing hub. While manufacturing remains a foundational part of the local economy, recent years have seen increased diversification, particularly in the healthcare and commercial retail sectors. Looking ahead, Salem’s economic strategy focuses on strengthening these existing industries while supporting continued diversification to build a more resilient local economy.

The 2020 Census estimates a local labor force of ~5,800 workers (U.S. Census, 2020). Employment trends show a modest decline in the size of the local workforce over recent decades, a pattern consistent with broader structural changes affecting small, manufacturing-oriented economies (Data USA 2025).

Importantly, Salem’s population does not function in isolation. Columbiana county hosts approximately

100,000 residents (Lightcast Report, 2026) and surrounding townships contribute significantly to the city’s labor force, consumer base, and service providers. Daily commuting for work and commerce plays a critical role in sustaining Salem’s economy, reinforcing the city’s position as a regional hub.

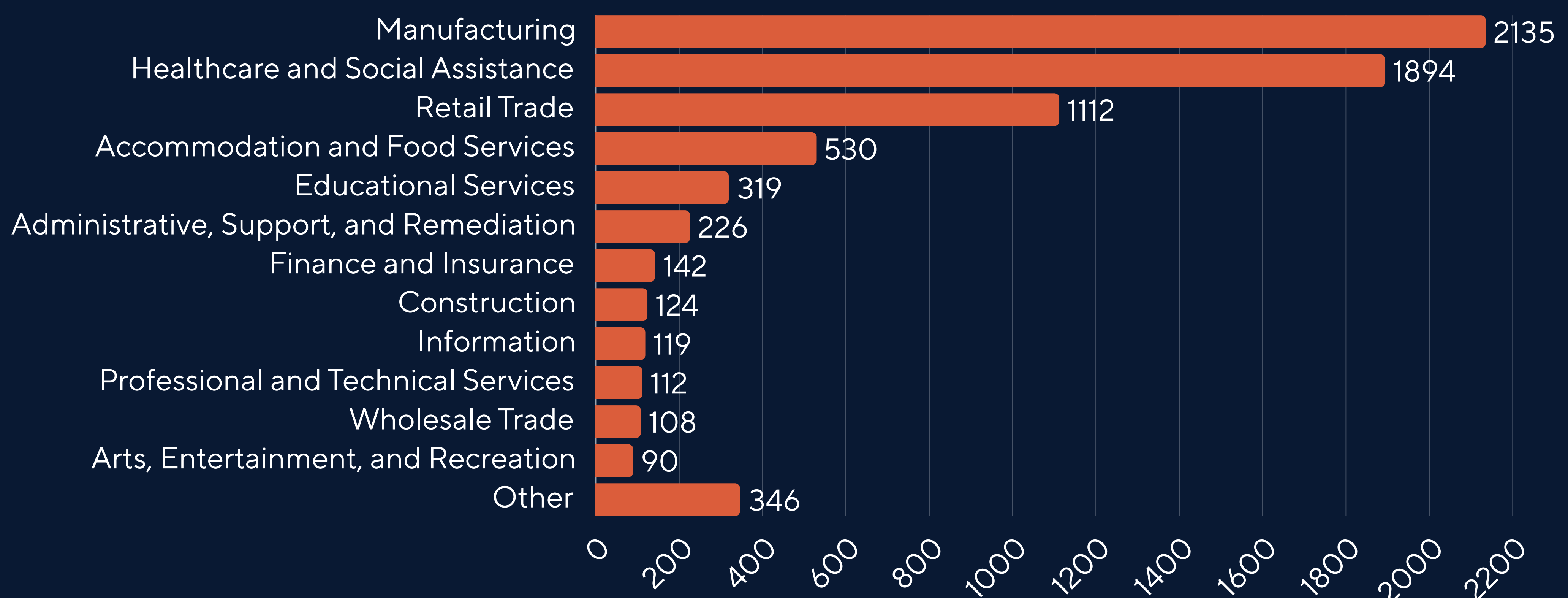
Key Employment Sectors

Salem’s economy is supported by a core group of employers across manufacturing, healthcare, retail, and education, which together form the backbone of local employment and service provision. Major employers include Ventra Salem, Fresh Mark, Salem Regional Medical Center, Walmart, and Butech Bliss (SOD Center, 2026). (See Figure 3).

Aging Population and Population Decline

The median age in Salem is approximately 43 years, and more than one-fifth of residents are aged 65 or older, making the city’s age distribution notably older

Figure 3: The Number of Employees by Sector in Salem

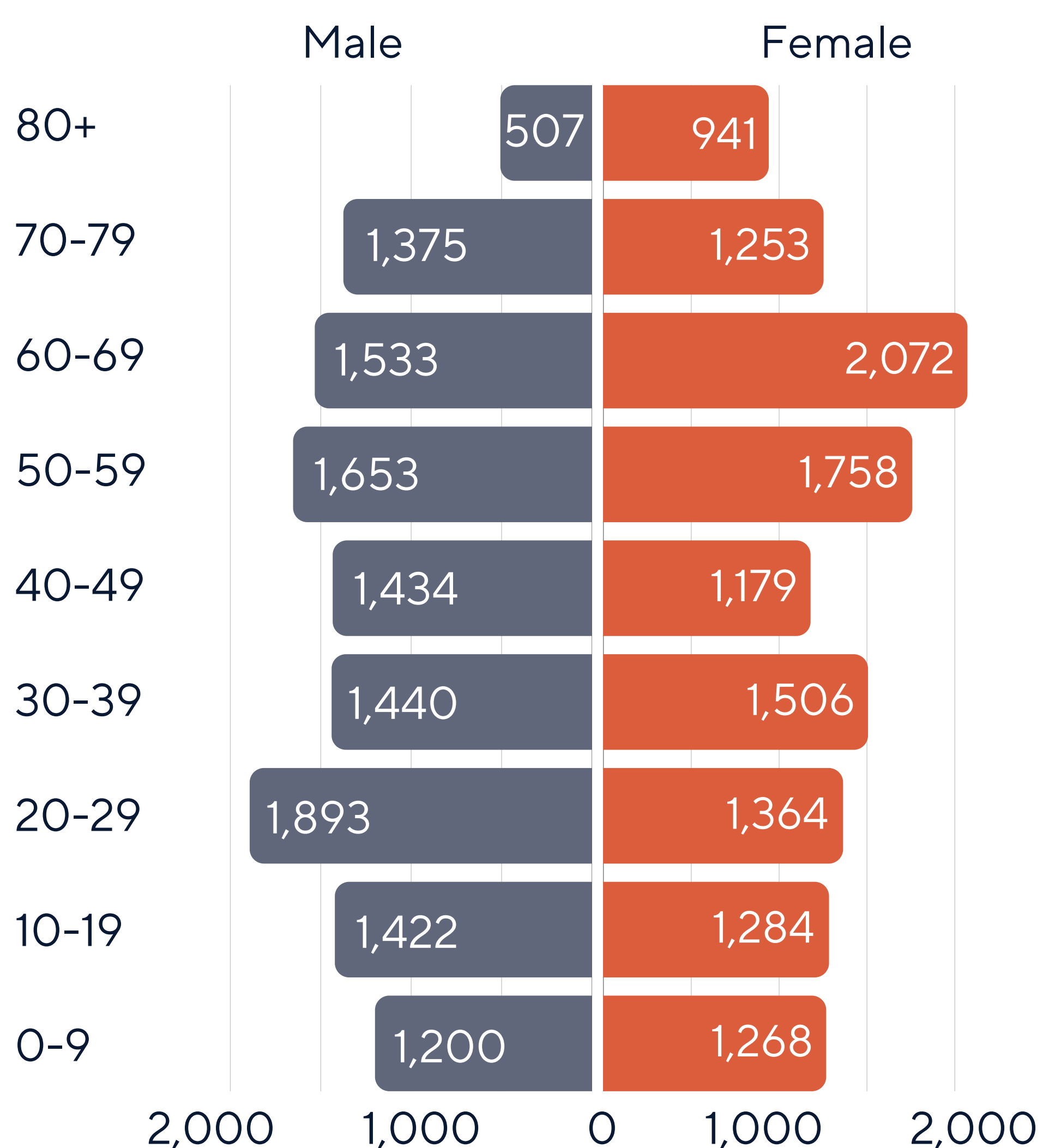


Source: U.S. Census (2020) www.data.census.gov

than both state and national averages (Data USA, 2025). At the same time, roughly 60% of residents are of working age, while approximately 17% are under the age of 18 (Census Reporter, 2026).

This age structure has important implications for Salem’s workforce availability, housing market, healthcare demand, and long-term economic resilience. An aging population increases demand for healthcare services, senior housing, and accessible infrastructure. Meanwhile, a smaller share of young residents can constrain future workforce growth if not offset through retention and in-migration. The age and gender distribution of the population illustrated in Figure 4 highlights these demographic imbalances and reinforces the need for targeted strategies across housing, employment, and community services.

Figure 4: Age-Gender Pyramid for the ZIP code 44460



Source: U.S. Census (2020) www.data.census.gov

Policies and investments that support aging in place, attract young families, and create pathways for workforce participation can help stabilize population levels and strengthen Salem’s economic foundation. These dynamics are explored in greater detail in Chapter 1, Population Trends: Retention and Attraction.

Salem's Residential Base

While Salem's population remains relatively homogeneous, net positive migration and attracting new residents plays an increasing role in sustaining the local workforce and economy. Salem is home to a small but growing population of transplants who have

Figure 5: Racial Demographics of Salem



Source: U.S. Census (2020) www.data.census.gov

come to live and work in the community; these are people who have chosen to relocate to the community and put down roots here. These transplants contribute to key local industries, pay local taxes, spend wages in the community, and support housing demand, making residential attraction a meaningful lever for economic growth alongside business recruitment and workforce development.

Salem's new residents arrive from a range of backgrounds and geographies, and their decision to choose Salem reflects the same affordability, stability, and quality of life that the city's long-term residents value. As Salem seeks to attract and retain residents over the next five years, understanding what draws people here and what keeps them is central to building a community that grows with intention. Incentives that invite new residents to move to Salem play a key role in shaping labor supply, housing demand, and consumer spending to spur the local economy.

Educational Outlook

Educational attainment among Salem residents reflects a workforce with strong foundational credentials but comparatively lower levels of higher education. Approximately 92% of residents have earned at least a high school diploma, while 16% hold a bachelor’s degree, slightly below Ohio’s statewide

average for bachelor's degree attainment (U.S. Census 2020). This aligns, however, with Salem's industrial and service-oriented employment base, where many jobs prioritize technical skills, certifications, and on-the-job training versus four-year degrees.

In addition, approximately 8% of Salem residents are veterans, representing a notable share of the population relative to state averages (Census Reporter 2026). This highlights the presence of a workforce with diverse skill sets, leadership experience, and technical training, as well as the importance of veteran-focused employment pathways, education, and support services within the community.

Unemployment and Underemployment

While unemployment figures in Salem remain low and stable, underemployment presents a more significant and persistent challenge. Approximately 25% of employed residents are considered underemployed, meaning they work in positions that do not require their level of education or fully utilize their skills (Lightcast Report, 2026). This mismatch between workforce capabilities and available jobs reflects broader structural challenges within small industrial and service-based economies, where higher-wage and advancement-oriented opportunities are limited.

Addressing underemployment will require not only job creation, but intentional strategies focused on the attraction of employers offering wages and roles aligned with the community's educational attainment.

Income, Poverty, and Economic Vulnerability

Despite Salem's relatively low cost of living, where estimates indicate a single person can live comfortably on roughly \$30,000 per year, economic vulnerability remains a concern for a substantial share of residents (BestPlaces Report, 2025). Salem's median household income stands at \$50,250, below the Ohio statewide median of \$69,680, however in the broader Micropolitan Statistical Area surrounding, the median household income rises to \$58,474, demonstrating a

strong regional economy for Salem to continue to tap into (Lightcast Report, 2026).

While median household incomes did grow by 10.9% between 2022 and 2023, outpacing inflation, approximately 19.2% of Salem residents live below the poverty line, compared to Ohio's overall rate of 13.2% (Census Reporter, 2025). Salem's child poverty rate of 32%, representing 1 in 3 children in Salem, is also nearly double the Ohio statewide rate and is reflected in educational outcomes (U.S. Census 2020). A notable portion of residents rely on public assistance programs including SSI, SNAP, and Medicaid, particularly among seniors on fixed incomes, children in low-income households, individuals with disabilities, and single-parent families (Lightcast Report, 2026).

Taken together, these indicators underscore the importance of coordinated economic, healthcare, and workforce strategies that improve income stability and reduce barriers to essential services, both as a matter of community wellbeing and as a foundation for sustainable economic growth.

CONCLUSION

Increasing economic investment, attracting higher-wage employment opportunities, and expanding amenities that support quality of life will be critical to ensuring long-term economic resilience and population stability in Salem over the next five years. Equally important is the need to strengthen public infrastructure, administrative capacity, and cross-sector coordination to ensure that growth is inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to community needs.

While the latter decades of the twentieth century were marked by population decline tied to losses in the manufacturing and industrial sectors, recent years have seen renewed momentum driven by downtown revitalization, small business growth, healthcare expansion, and renewed manufacturing investment. This progress positions the city to build on recent gains and continue shaping a more diversified, resilient, and opportunity-rich local economy.

CHAPTER 1

POPULATION TRENDS

CURRENT OUTLOOK

As of the most recent estimates, Salem is home to 11,883 residents, with modest population decline of 1.6% since the 2020 census, consistent with trends across small and mid-sized communities in Northeast Ohio (U.S. Census). While the pace of decline has slowed relative to earlier decades, overall population growth has not offset these losses. Approximately 20.8% of Salem's residents are 65 or older, creating growing demand for healthcare, accessible housing, and social support services, even as the working-age population contracts (Census Reporter 2023).

This demographic structure reflects two interconnected themes that emerged consistently from stakeholder conversations and discussions with city leaders: Salem is working to care for its aging, long-time residents while simultaneously facing the challenge of attracting and retaining younger adults and families.

WHY POPULATION TRENDS MATTER

While a dedicated chapter on population was not included in the previous report, the persistent themes and complex challenges surfacing from Salem's specific demographic realities made it a necessary addition here. The considerations described in this chapter do not fit neatly into any single sector of the economy because they touch upon nearly every area of planned improvement over the next five years. It felt essential to address them directly before proceeding. How Salem grows its economy depends on how each person in the community shows up as an

employee, a homeowner, a consumer, or a volunteer. These dynamics are deeply interrelated, and economic development in Salem must be context-specific, shaped by the real needs, challenges, and capacity of our residents.

Understanding Salem's community is critical to addressing both current and emerging challenges. For example, the city's aging population will require expanded senior care and healthcare capacity, addressed in Chapter 3. The need to attract skilled younger workers is equally pressing, but Salem's current shortage of middle housing and multifamily units directly limits its ability to do so, which is addressed in Chapter 6. And as Salem's youth graduate and enter higher education or the workforce, gaps in high-wage, high-skill employment opportunities contribute to underemployment, instability, and strain on local services, addressed in Chapter 7.

Population-related considerations are therefore embedded across this plan rather than treated as a standalone strategy. Recommendations across all sectors intentionally integrate demographic context, ensuring that housing, workforce, healthcare, and community development initiatives directly respond to the needs of Salem's current and future residents. New projects and investments are evaluated through this lens, with particular attention to creating options that support young families, first-time homebuyers, and aging residents to enable mobility within the community and support long-term stability.

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES CONSIDERED ACROSS THIS REPORT

Infrastructure to Support Aging-in-Place

Salem's aging demographic presents both opportunities and challenges. Older residents contribute to community stability, civic engagement, and institutional memory. However, an aging population also increases demand for healthcare services, accessible housing, transportation options, and social support systems. Without targeted planning, these pressures may strain public services and limit the city's ability to meet changing workforce requirements.

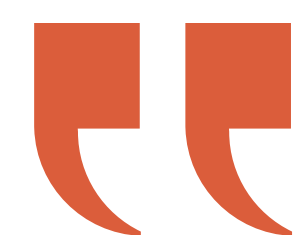
Salem has strong capacity with existing senior care facilities, including chronic and acute care services that allow many residents to age in place. These facilities and their associated healthcare infrastructure are addressed more fully in Chapter 3.

Youth Retention and Out-Migration

Like many communities with strong manufacturing and industrial legacy, Salem faces challenges retaining younger residents after high school or post-secondary education. Salem's population has decreased by approximately 1.6% since the 2020 census, declining at a rate of about 0.2% annually, reflecting the loss of major industrial partners, a pattern common across similarly positioned mid-sized communities in Northeast Ohio (U.S. Census, 2020).

Community survey research and regional data suggest that migration into Salem is influenced by factors such as housing affordability, family ties, and quality of life, while out-migration is often associated with limited high-wage employment opportunities and the pull of educational institutions in larger metro areas.

Stakeholders consistently highlighted that without intentional strategies to engage and invest in youth, Salem risks further contraction of its future workforce.



Between aging infrastructure, limited job opportunities, and a tendency to resist change, Salem risks becoming a town people love, but leave. If we want to thrive between 2025-2030, we have to start planning for the adults Gen Z and Gen Alpha are becoming, not just the kids they are now. That means investing in economic development, remote work hubs, small business support, affordable housing, mental health resources, and spaces where young people can lead, create, and stay.

*- Female, aged 30-39
(2025 Salem Growth Survey)*

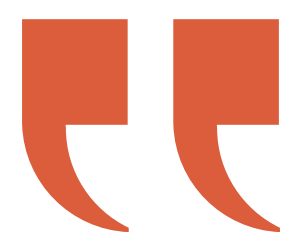
Attracting Young Families, New Residents, and Salem Alumni

For many small cities like Salem, the challenge of population attraction is not only about reaching potential new residents, but also about welcoming back and attracting the people who have left. Generations of Salem graduates have followed a familiar path: leaving for college, early career opportunities, or the pull of larger metro areas, and never returning. As one stakeholder observed, "regionally, we lost three generations of kids. They left. They went to Columbus or Pittsburgh, and they never came back. We have to give them a reason to return... giving social reasons and economic reasons to stay are key."

The recent downtown revival, the growth of local small businesses, and the energy around new investment have begun to shift that perception.

Beyond alumni, attracting young families and new residents more broadly requires Salem to compete on the factors that drive relocation decisions, such as

housing availability and community, school quality, health facilities, and recreational opportunities. These factors are addressed directly in subsequent chapters, with recommendations designed to strengthen Salem's appeal to the next generation of residents, whether they are discovering the city for the first time or looking for a reason to return.



Ten years ago, I would have never thought of moving home, let alone opening a business here. It's exciting when you see new places coming to town that are taking risks and investing in the community. It's like, 'oh yeah, I want to be part of that.' That helps new people want to come into the community or bring people back. They realize, 'I don't have to be in a big city. I can come back to Salem and be part of the solution to help push it forward.

*– Anne Gano
Owner of the Rumpled Queen*

Affordability and Quality of Life

Salem's cost of living is one of its most tangible competitive advantages. With an advantageous cost-of-living index, residents pay meaningfully less than the national average for housing, healthcare, and everyday goods, a genuine asset for residents and workers in a regional market where affordability is increasingly rare.

Yet affordability tells only part of the story. As detailed in the Overview of Salem in 2026, median household incomes remain below state averages, and poverty rates, particularly among children, reflect a community where a lower cost of living is less a lifestyle preference and more a lifeline.

This reality is visible in the daily work of the

organizations that support Salem's residents. As Lisa Vittorio of The Brightside Project shared, the organization's back-to-school voucher program served 570 students in 2025, providing clothes and shoes to at least a quarter of the student body. "I think we're always going to have families that struggle financially," she reflected, "and so for us to be able to lift them up and support them is really going to support the community as a whole."

Strengthening Salem's economy over the next five years means building on our advantage of affordability while investing in the conditions that will allow more of our residents to access higher-wage jobs, quality housing, and key services. This is a persistent consideration throughout the report and the recommendations included.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Salem is far from alone in confronting these challenges. Counties across Northeast Ohio are largely projected to lose population, driven by an aging population, deaths outnumbering births, and stagnant migration. **Columbiana County is projected to see a population reduction of nearly 25% by 2050**, dropping to approximately 76,500 residents if current trends continue (Ohio Department of Development, 2023).

These projections represent real potential constraints on workforce availability, tax revenue, and the demand for local services in coming years and decades. As these challenges begin to impact regions and towns across the country, Salem hopes to position itself as an affordable, appealing, and inviting city in an increasingly competitive market for residents and workers.

The concerns related to resident retention and attraction are intimately linked with every topic that follows. No plan could be comprehensive without an honest assessment of who lives here, what they need, and what Salem must offer to grow. Taken together, Salem's demographic trends, labor market conditions, cost structure, and community assets create both constraints and opportunities for thoughtful and strategic economic development by 2031.

CHAPTER 2

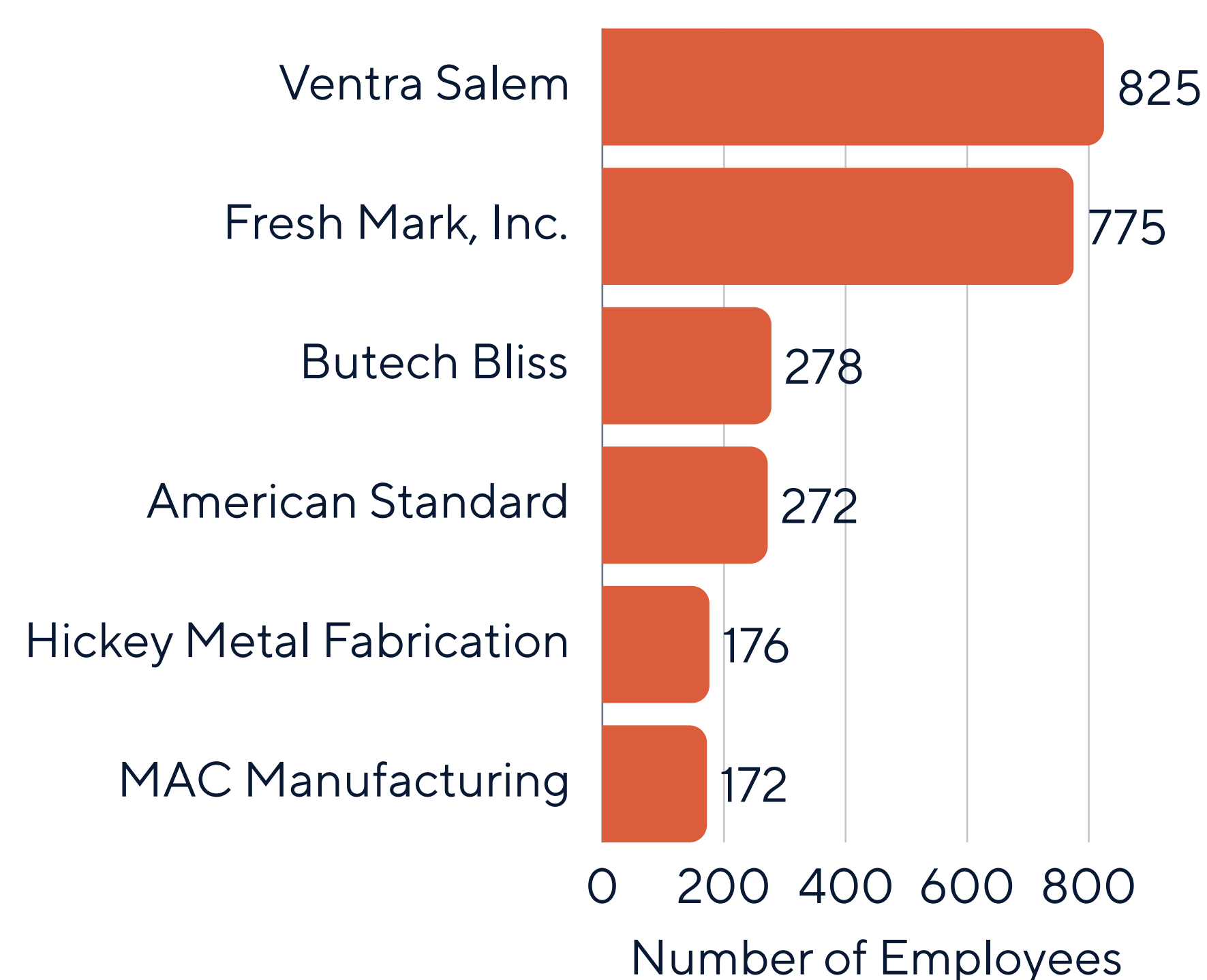
MANUFACTURING AND INDUSTRY

CURRENT OUTLOOK

Manufacturing remains one of Salem’s strongest economic engines, shaping the community’s identity and fueling long-term competitiveness. Local employers have continued to invest, adapt, and grow despite national challenges such as supply-chain volatility and shifting market demands. This stability reflects the depth of Salem’s industrial experience, a workforce long connected to manufacturing culture, and companies that remain committed to the community. Salem enters the next five years with substantial momentum and confidence in its industrial future. For Salem residents, that confidence is grounded in something tangible. Manufacturing has long been the city's primary source of middle-wage employment, and its continued health is directly connected to the household stability, local spending, and tax base that support everything else in this report.

Top manufacturing firms in Salem include:

Figure 6: Top Manufacturing Employers



Source: The SOD Center (2026), Salem Ohio Benefits.



I think from a supply chain perspective, the more manufacturing you have, the easier supply chain becomes to our vendors, because it's their best interest to ship to your location or a close location. I don't mind helping other manufacturers out because they're helping us too, there's some synergy there. The more manufacturing, the better supply chain. That's a big deal.

- CEO of a local company

CHANGE IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS

The city’s manufacturing base has seen steady reinvestment, facility upgrades, and product innovation. Employers note that Salem provides a reliable environment where operations can scale, supported by strong relationships and a steady regional labor force.

Unlike many legacy manufacturing regions, Salem has maintained and grown its industrial presence, positioning the city as a stable, attractive location for production and industrial services.

SUCCESS OF THE INDUSTRIAL PARK

A major pillar of Salem’s industrial success is the Salem Industrial Park, which has supported manufacturing growth since its establishment in the 1960s. Its infrastructure, accessibility, and proximity to suppliers continue to make it one of Salem’s most valuable assets.

Manufacturers emphasized the benefits of being located near one another, describing how shared proximity reduces costs, strengthens supply-chain relationships, and creates efficiencies that are difficult to replicate in more dispersed locations. These connections reinforce the park’s role as a collaborative industrial ecosystem.

Looking ahead, approximately 65 acres within the park have completed environmental testing and are now prioritized for advancement to full development-ready status during this plan cycle. Over the next five years, Salem and its partners will undertake the coordinated steps—engineering, site planning, utility preparation, and entitlement work—needed to position this acreage for new manufacturing growth and expansion opportunities (Salem News 2025).

The strength of the industrial park is complemented by the historic industrial corridor south of downtown, where long-established manufacturers and entrepreneurial operations continue to function. This plan includes the cleanup and demolition of one brownfield site and the reactivation of a second previously remediated site to return it to productive use, expanding the city’s future industrial land supply and reinforcing reinvestment in this important district.



I think the more that you have activity, the more opportunities you have, and the more of us there are- I think it just drives all of us to be better. So, I like the industrial park a lot. I would love to see some more businesses have opportunities to move in there.

- CEO of a local company



ONGOING CHALLENGES

Even with strong momentum, several conditions must be addressed to fully capture future growth. The most significant challenge is the limited supply of development-ready industrial land. Although the 65 acres in the industrial park represent major future potential, they are not yet fully prepared for construction. Advancing these acres through the site-ready process is a priority.

Additionally, underutilized or legacy industrial properties elsewhere in the city require strategic intervention, including environmental work, demolition, or redevelopment planning. Addressing these long-standing barriers will open new opportunities and expand Salem's industrial landscape.

Concerns That May Arise in the Next Five Years

The pace of industrial change is accelerating, and Salem must be prepared to respond quickly to opportunities. Without sufficient site readiness, the city may risk losing projects to communities with shovel-ready land. Infrastructure capacity, particularly water, sewer, transportation access, and energy, will continue to influence Salem's competitiveness in regional site searches. Ensuring these systems can support advanced manufacturing needs will remain essential.

Market-driven redevelopment of older industrial sites may also require sustained coordination with property owners, environmental consultants, and regional partners. Continued visibility in state and regional economic development networks will be critical to ensuring Salem is considered for high-value projects.

CONCLUSION

Salem's manufacturing sector has weathered the pressures that hollowed out comparable communities across the region, and it has done so through the commitment of employers who chose to stay, invest, and grow here. The work ahead builds directly on that

foundation. By prioritizing site readiness, remediating legacy properties, and aligning infrastructure with modern manufacturing needs, Salem can continue to attract and strengthen the manufacturing and industry that call our city home. This work connects directly to the housing, workforce, and downtown investments described elsewhere in this plan, because a city that can offer quality industrial jobs, trained workers, and an attractive place to live is far better positioned to compete.

Workforce considerations are addressed in detail in Chapter 7, Workforce & Education.





RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR MANUFACTURING AND INDUSTRY BETWEEN 2026-2031:

Expand Salem's Industrial Park

- Develop and implement a redevelopment plan for Heavy and Light Industrial zoned properties not in use.
- Develop and implement a plan for site-ready development of city acreage including securing environmental approval to develop sites.
- Formulate a budget to prepare shovel-ready sites based on environmental review and secure funding for ready projects.
- Pursue annexation or redevelopment of underutilized properties to address land constraints for industrial growth.

Support Industrial Growth

- Coordinate public-private partnerships for larger development, including identifying sites and property owners.
- Invest in infrastructure upgrades – water, sewer, transportation, and energy – to support industrial expansion.
- Provide funding sources to assist site and infrastructure upgrades.

Develop Incentive Promotional Materials to Attract Manufacturers

- Improve messaging on tax incentives, including the Community Reinvestment Area (CRA), and streamline site approval processes for developers.
- Develop incentive promotional materials and an onboarding process targeting potential manufacturers.
- Market Salem's industrial park, industrial sites, and industrial sector to attract new industries and support local business expansion.
- Develop partnerships to attract higher-wage manufacturing jobs and advanced technology industries, including hosting annual roundtables or tours of available sites.
- Maintain a local Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) program.



CHAPTER 3

HEALTHCARE AND WELLNESS

CURRENT OUTLOOK

Salem is distinguished among communities of its size by the depth and breadth of its healthcare infrastructure. The Salem Regional Medical Center (SRMC), an independent, private, not-for-profit hospital provides emergency, surgical, and specialized care that serves not just Salem residents but the broader Columbiana County region (SRMC, 2026). SRMC has extended its reach well beyond its main campus through a network of outpatient clinics, primary care practices, and specialty centers spanning Salem, Canfield, Columbiana, Damascus, Lisbon, and North Jackson (SRMC, 2026).

Beyond being a critical healthcare provider, SRMC is one of Salem's largest employers and a significant economic anchor. Its presence supports a collection of related businesses and services including private physician offices, nursing and rehabilitation centers, home health and hospice providers, and dialysis services.

While 42% of respondents to the 2025 Salem Growth survey reported that the hospital met or exceeded their expectations, stakeholders and residents alike expressed concern about the challenge of attracting and retaining medical professionals as residents continue to age.

MEDICAL CENTERS AND AVAILABLE CARE

Primary and Specialty Care

There are several primary care locations serving Salem and the surrounding region, including practices operated by SRMC and private primary care practices including Salem Family Care, Mercy Health, Family Practice Center of Ohio, and Flourish Health.

SRMC also partners and operates several specialty centers covering diagnostic services, gastroenterology, pulmonary care, orthopedic surgery, cardiovascular and thoracic surgery, occupational therapy, and outpatient or partial hospitalization behavioral health programs for adults (SRMC, 2026). This breadth of specialty care is notable for a community of Salem's size and represents a meaningful quality-of-life asset for current and prospective residents.



Emergency and Urgent Care

SRMC maintains a 24-hour emergency department at its main Salem campus, serving as the primary point of entry for acute care in the region. For severe trauma and critical care situations, SRMC operates a 10-bed Intensive Care Unit within its Patient Private Room Tower, supplemented by 17 step-down cardiac care beds (SRMC, 2025).

Independent, Assisted, and Senior Living

Salem has substantial existing capacity in skilled nursing and long-term care, with several facilities serving residents across a spectrum of need:

- Blossom Nursing and Rehabilitation Center – 100-bed skilled nursing
- Salem Healthcare West – 90-bed skilled nursing
- Salem Healthcare North – 86-bed skilled nursing
- Salem Circle of Care – 62-bed skilled nursing
- Salem Healthcare East – 50-bed skilled nursing
- Auburn Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center – 44-bed skilled nursing
- Courtyard at Lexington – Assisted Living
- Brookdale Assisted Living – Assisted Living
- Grace Woods Senior Living of Salem – Assisted Living

Chronic and post-acute care needs are further supported by Salem Visiting Nurse Association, Salem Home Medical, Community Hospice, Fresenius Dialysis Center, and several outpatient physical therapy practices throughout the city.

A MAJOR NEW INVESTMENT: SHEPHERD OF THE VALLEY

In September 2025, Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Retirement Services Inc. broke ground on a senior living community on 34 acres along the Salem bypass (Salem News, 2025). The development will feature 36 independent living villas, a three-story building with 52 independent apartments, and 36 assisted living suites. In addition to living facilities, the community will host a clubhouse, fitness center, restaurant and bar, marketplace, bocce and pickleball courts, raised gardens, dog park, and spaces for spiritual services and community programming. The initial project is expected to be completed by the end of 2027, with plans to explore expansion through adding a skilled nursing and rehabilitation facility if needs arise (Shepherd of the Valley, 2026).

This development represents a significant private investment in Salem's future and will not only address imminent housing demands among seniors in our community but also create permanent employment in the healthcare and hospitality sectors.



I think Shepherd of the Valley is an excellent development for Salem! I've been able to see the plans for some of it, and it looks exceptional. If you're familiar with the quality of work and care that is put into some of their other sites, you'll know that this is a quality investment.

– Salem City Councilor

LEARN MORE



Connects to: www.shepherdofthevalley.com

WELLNESS AND RECREATION

The Salem Community Center serves as a central indoor location for recreational activity in the city, offering a wide range of fitness and wellness amenities under one roof. The facility includes an indoor aquatics complex, fully equipped fitness center, an indoor track, athletic fields, and sports complex, and hosts youth and adult sport leagues (SCC, 2025). For those seeking a more personalized fitness experience, Salem also supports a small but active ecosystem of local, independently owned gyms and fitness studios, providing residents with alternatives that cater to a range of fitness preferences and schedules.

Meanwhile, the city's park system encompasses over 375 acres of ground and water (Salem Parks Department, 2026). These include:

Waterworth Memorial Park (55 acres) Salem's largest park and is home to a duck pond, walking trails, dog park, large pavilions available to reserve, and playground facilities.

Centennial Park (26 acres) The city's oldest park, featuring picnic shelters, basketball and tennis courts, a 9-hole disc golf course, a large playground, and a nature trail.

W. H. Mullins Park (2 acres) Formerly known as Cedar Park, this park offers a small children's play area, large sandbox, and picnic facilities.

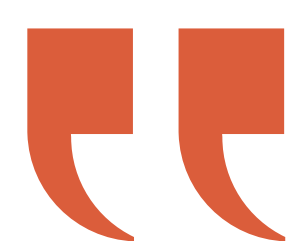
Kelley Park (5 acres) Named after the first Director of Salem's park system, Joe M. Kelley, this park offers the only lit softball field in the park system and includes a restroom, concession stand, pavilion, and ample parking.

Within the broader regional area, residents also have easy access to Eagleton's Glen Recreation Area (approximately 6 miles south of Salem), featuring 70 acres of undeveloped trails and camping areas, and Salem City Lake (approximately 8 miles south of Salem) where residents can enjoy boating, fishing, and picnicking.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Workforce Shortages and Retention

Healthcare employers across the region face persistent challenges recruiting and retaining qualified staff, a trend that is national in scope but acutely felt in smaller communities like Salem. This is particularly true for nursing, allied health professions, and long-term care roles. Competitive wages and career opportunities in larger metropolitan areas often draw talent away, while local providers must navigate recruitment constraints alongside high demand for services.



At our nursing homes, bed capacity is going to have to double in the next five years. So that means your staffing is going to have to double. There are not enough people out there.

*– Rich Limongi
CEO of Shepherd of the Valley*

Challenges of Supporting an Aging Population

Salem's demographic profile, with more than 20% of residents over 65, means that demand for healthcare services, chronic disease management, and long-term care will continue to grow substantially over the next decade (Census Reporter, 2025). The healthcare system's capacity to meet this demand without significant workforce expansion will be one of the defining challenges of the 2026-2031 period.

Stakeholders and community survey respondents repeatedly noted that the needs of aging residents will not only impact local health services, but also strain housing demand, local transportation access, and

workforce needs. These considerations were weighed heavily in the final recommendations, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Population Trends: Retention and Attraction.

Healthcare Affordability and Coverage Types

Overall, **91.8% of the population of Salem has healthcare coverage**, with this largely represented by employment-sponsored plans, while approximately 8.2% of residents remain uninsured (CCHNA, 2025). While city specific data is hard to come by, approximately 26% of Columbiana county residents receive health coverage through Medicaid (CCHNA, 2025) and 1 in 2 (48.5%) of children under the age of 18 are enrolled in Medicaid (CCHNA, 2025).

For a community with Salem's poverty rate and concentration of low-wage employment, this gap has real consequences for both individual wellbeing and the demand placed on emergency and acute care services. Economic development strategies that

improve coverage access and reduce barriers to care will be important to both public health and fiscal sustainability of local providers.

CONCLUSION

Healthcare and wellness are foundational to Salem's ability to support residents across all stages of life and remain competitive in attracting the workforce and families the city needs to grow.

The recommendations that follow reflect both the depth of Salem's existing healthcare infrastructure and the practical urgency of what still needs to be addressed. Investments in healthcare workforce development, ADA accessibility, transportation access, active recreation infrastructure, and the long-term stability of SRMC are not separate priorities, they are interconnected pillars of a community health strategy that serves Salem residents across every stage of life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR HEALTHCARE AND WELLNESS BETWEEN 2026-2031:

- Support healthcare workforce recruitment and retention programs.
- Improve ADA accessibility in public buildings and facilities. (Also in Chapter 9: City Administration and Public Services)
- Leverage the USA's 250th anniversary for health-focused community events and branding.
- Promote wellness through better sidewalks, bike paths, and multi-modal transportation options. (Also in Chapter 8: Transportation, Road Safety, Parking, and Multi-modal Mobility)



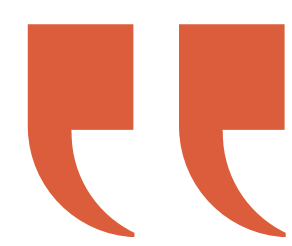
CHAPTER 4 DOWNTOWN

CURRENT OUTLOOK

Over the past five years, Downtown Salem has undergone a remarkable transformation. What was once a district struggling with persistent vacancies and aging structures has emerged as one of the community's most visible success stories. The reduction of vacant storefronts by 77% is one of the most significant indicators of progress (SOD Center Data, 2025). This has been accompanied by millions of dollars in private reinvestment and over \$2.3 million in competitive grants supporting rehabilitation, façade improvements, and public space enhancements (SOD Center Data, 2026). The district's upward trajectory has also been strengthened by four Ohio Historic Tax Credit awards, each reinforcing the economic viability of rehabilitating Salem's historic assets.

These improvements have changed the feel and function of the downtown area. Recent inventories conducted by the City and SOD Center confirm this continued upward momentum. The Designated Outdoor Refreshment Area (DORA) has expanded social activity and evening visitation, while new restaurants, small businesses, and upper-floor renovations have brought people back into previously underutilized spaces. The flow of visitors to Second Street Plaza, increased activity along East State Street, and the emergence of new event programming demonstrate a growing sense of vibrancy and renewed confidence in downtown as a destination.

Downtown Salem has shifted from a place defined by deterioration to one characterized by momentum, investment, and a rising sense of possibility.



I'm excited about the downtown continuing with this renaissance it's had. When I first moved home after living out West, I walked through downtown and there were a lot of vacant, unoccupied buildings. That has absolutely reversed.

– Jake Gano
*Economic Development Chair
for the City of Salem*

**77% REDUCTION IN
VACANT STOREFRONTS
IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS**

Source: Internal SOD Center Tracking Data (2025)



CHANGE OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS

The last planning cycle marked a period of visible and measurable progress. Vacancies declined at a pace not seen in decades, building conditions improved through both private investment and strengthened enforcement, and public perception shifted as more buildings underwent restoration and redevelopment.

The establishment of DORA fundamentally changed the experience of dining and recreation downtown, while events and community programming helped reactivate a district that had historically struggled with consistent foot traffic.

Property owners have increasingly taken on upper-floor rehabilitation, creating new opportunities

for second- and third-floor living that did not exist five years ago. Improvements to façades, storefronts, and common gathering areas have supported businesses and enhanced the district's visual appeal. Downtown is not simply recovering but entering a new phase of reinvestment and energy. As one local civil servant remarked, "I go to meetings with regional directors, and I get comments all the time about how pretty our downtown is. People come in all the time for sporting events, the school, the downtown, even the hospital—they all look beautiful."

A NEW GATHERING SPACE IN DOWNTOWN LINCOLN PLAZA

Dedicated in December 2024 at the intersection of State Street and Lincoln Avenue, Lincoln Plaza represents one of the most meaningful public-private investments in downtown Salem in a generation (Salem News, 2024). The plaza features a gazebo, fountain, veterans memorial, and a 7-foot bronze statue of President Abraham Lincoln, a figure whose connection to Salem runs deep. Salem has long been recognized for its role in the abolitionist movement, playing a major role as a hub along the underground railroad. Honoring that legacy at the center of downtown places Salem's history at the heart of its future.

The project was brought to life through private donations, grants, and state and federal funding



awards that were specifically designated for the project and could not be used elsewhere (Morning Journal 2024). Governor Mike DeWine presided over the dedication ceremony alongside Mayor Cyndi Baronzzi Dickey, Columbiana County commissioner Mike Halleck, and a crowd of Salem residents (City of Salem, 2024).

Since opening, Lincoln Plaza has become an active gathering place, hosting community events, music nights, and public programming that bring residents and visitors into the heart of downtown (WKBN, 2024). Future projects along the corridor will build on the momentum Lincoln Plaza has helped create, because Salem's commitment to its downtown is not a single investment but an ongoing one.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Despite significant gains, a few challenges remain within the Central Business District that will require sustained attention over the next five years.

Aging Structures and Long-Term Viability

Some of downtown's older buildings are approaching a point where rehabilitation becomes economically challenging without targeted intervention. Major structural repairs, stabilization work, and in some cases strategic decisions about long-term viability will require coordinated approaches involving redevelopment tools, incentives, and partnerships. Rising construction and renovation costs add pressure to this dynamic, and without clear pathways for incentive support, upper-floor housing development in particular may slow before it reaches its potential. The city and its partners will need to be deliberate about which properties to prioritize and what tools to deploy.

Building Standards and Code Enforcement

Consistent enforcement of the vacant building ordinance, IPMC standards, and fire code requirements remains essential to protecting the investment momentum downtown has built. Some property owners are either unable or unwilling to undertake needed improvements, and those properties create gaps in the district's overall trajectory that affect the confidence of surrounding investors and businesses. Sustaining the progress of the past five years depends on maintaining this enforcement infrastructure with the same diligence that helped the downtown come to life.

Filling Vacancies and Attracting Businesses and Residents

The 2025 Salem Growth Survey found that downtown revitalization remains a top priority for residents, with respondents identifying "downtown revitalization" as the second highest priority for the next five years, after

"retail, dining, and local businesses" (Salem Growth Survey 2025). Translating that support into continued occupancy gains will require intentional efforts to match the right tenants with available spaces and remove barriers to investment.

Uneven investment across blocks remains a real risk. Without deliberate attention, some areas of the Central Business District could develop new pockets of underperformance even as others thrive. Second- and third-floor residential development is central to this effort, bringing the density of daily activity that sustains retail and dining at street level. Commercial recruitment and retention strategies, discussed further in Chapter 5, will be equally important to ensure that vacancy rates continue to decline across the community.

Wayfinding, Mobility, and Accessibility

As foot traffic and visitation grow, the need for improved wayfinding, pedestrian safety, and accessible routes through the downtown core becomes more pressing. The management of bicycles, e-bikes, and scooters will also require thoughtful planning as activity increases. These considerations connect directly to the broader transportation and mobility investments discussed in Chapter 8, as well as to concerns about tourism and marketing, which are discussed in Chapter 10.

CONCLUSION

The next five years should focus on advancing the momentum already underway by continuing to expand downtown living opportunities, improving the public realm, attracting high-quality businesses, and upholding strong property standards. Growth in second- and third-floor housing remains central to sustaining restaurants, retail, entertainment, and daily activity in the core of the city. Enhancing mobility through better signage, lighting, pedestrian connections, and digital kiosks will strengthen the visitor experience and support longer stays. Continued enforcement of maintenance standards, paired with strategic redevelopment tools and collaborative partnerships, will help address persistent problem properties and protect the significant investments made across the district.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR DOWNTOWN BETWEEN 2026-2031:

- Promote policies and programs that discourage prolonged building inactivity and support property owners in keeping storefronts actively maintained and engaged.
- Develop and implement a targeted recruitment strategy to proactively attract desired downtown businesses that align with community needs, market demand, and existing district character, with a focus on filling remaining vacant storefronts.
- Evaluate the feasibility of a downtown retail incubator to support startup and early-stage businesses through shared space, reduced startup costs, technical assistance, and short-term leases designed to transition successful concepts into permanent storefronts.
- Improve wayfinding signage and parking awareness; consider a "Park Once" campaign to encourage walkability.
- Improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure; clarify ordinances for e-bikes and scooters.
- Improve mobility and accessibility: add sidewalks, bike lanes, and traffic calming measures; explore public transit options for seniors and workers.
- Evaluate current accessibility and condition of transportation infrastructure.
- Develop a plan to mitigate areas of concern and gaps in transportation infrastructure.
- Promote second- and third-floor residential development downtown. (Also in Chapter 6: Housing)
- Secure funding for 2 digital kiosks downtown to promote wayfinding and walkability. (Also in Chapter 10: Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events)
- Add third spaces (benches, outdoor seating) to encourage downtown activity.
- Increase community events and festivals (e.g., winter Kringle market in public parks). (Also in Chapter 10: Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events)

CHAPTER 5

COMMERCIAL AND RETAIL

INTRODUCTION

Commercial and retail activity remains a central part of Salem’s economic identity, shaping both the city’s daily life and its long-term competitiveness. Retail businesses, restaurants, and service providers contribute to employment, tax revenue, and the sense of community that residents consistently describe as a defining strength of Salem. Over the past five years, the commercial landscape has experienced progress, but also uneven investment. Downtown has seen renewed interest in small business development and local dining, while the West side continues to experience gaps in essential services and shopping options; all trends consistent with national shifts in consumer behavior and the realities facing brick-and-mortar retailers.

“I have to leave Salem to buy almost everything but groceries.”

-Male, aged 40-49
(2025 Salem Growth Survey)

CURRENT OUTLOOK

Salem’s outlook is opportunity-rich and trending positive. In 2024, the SOD Center invited Retail Strategies to conduct an opportunity-gap analysis, the results of which put specific numbers to what many residents have sensed. The Primary Trade Area defined by Retail Strategies, encompassing Salem and a drivable radius beyond, includes approximately 69,920 residents with a median household income of \$63,211 and an average household income of \$82,547, indicating capacity for both convenience retail and destination experiences (Retail Strategies 2024). The area’s age distribution, balanced across working-age

adults and older residents, supports a wide range of commercial concepts, from daily goods and family dining to home improvement and specialty retail.

Demand in Salem significantly exceeds local supply across several key categories: Food Service & Drinking Places (+\$55.3M), Building Materials & Garden (+\$39.3M), Electronics & Appliances (+\$5.8M), Furniture (+\$10.5M), and Non-Store Retail (+\$194M). The Non-Store Retail figure in particular reflects strong omnichannel consumer behavior and points to potential for showroom or hybrid fulfillment concepts within city limits (Retail Strategies 2024).

Categories where demand exceeds local supply:

- **Food Service & Drinking Places** (\$55.3M)
- **Building Materials & Garden** (\$39.3M)
- **Electronics & Appliances** (\$5.8M)
- **Furniture** (\$10.5M)
- **Non-Store Retail** (\$194M)

Community input from the 2025 survey reinforces these priorities and confirms what market data suggests: residents strongly desire more dining and shopping options, particularly those that support everyday convenience and strengthen downtown vibrancy.

As a tertiary retail market set within a regional economy of several larger, metropolitan communities, Salem can advance by aligning high-quality data, site readiness, and relationship-based recruitment with appropriate spaces. Several national brands have expressed interest in Salem when the right combination of prototype fit, traffic visibility, and franchise availability exists.

CHANGE OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS

Over the last five years, Salem has significantly enhanced its retail recruitment capacity through its partnership with Retail Strategies, which has elevated the city's visibility with national brands and strengthened the alignment between local sites and retailer requirements. The 2025 Annual Retail Report documents active engagement across multiple categories, from quick-service and sit-down dining to discount retail, home goods, and medical, reflecting an opportunity for a broadened and increasingly sophisticated recruitment pipeline.

Many operators have requested ongoing updates on available spaces, particularly when second-generation restaurant sites, drive-thru-capable end-caps, or grocery-anchored pads become available, signaling a clear shift from passive interest to active monitoring of Salem's market.

Locally, Downtown Salem has continued to gain momentum through the consistent efforts of the SOD Center, the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce, and the Downtown Salem Partnership, all of which play ongoing roles in business engagement, promotional activity, and overall downtown activation. Public sentiment has also improved compared to the previous planning cycle, with residents describing Salem in overwhelmingly positive terms and identifying clear momentum in both commercial activity and community identity.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Despite notable progress, Salem continues to face several challenges that shape its retail environment.

Retail Gaps and Spending Leakage

Key retail categories including dining, home improvement, household goods, electronics, and furniture remain underrepresented relative to local demand, contributing to continued spending leakage into surrounding markets. This is not simply a matter of preference. In the 2025 Community Survey, "retail, dining, and local businesses" were ranked as the top

priority for the next five years, with 16% of respondents selecting this option as a priority. When asked specifically, **60% of respondents said shopping options "need improvement"**, compared to 38% who said restaurant options "need improvement" (Salem Growth Survey 2025). Survey responses reflect similar categories as those identified through the Retail Strategies opportunity-gap analysis (2024). This alignment between community input and quantifiable demand makes the case for targeted recruitment more urgent in the next five years.

Meeting Retailer Requirements

Many prospective retailers are interested in Salem but require the right combination of building size, visibility, traffic volume, access, and co-tenancy before advancing to the next step. Retailer feedback consistently reflects this pattern, emphasizing that Salem is 'in play' pending the right real estate match. This is a common dynamic in tertiary markets, and it places a premium on proactive site preparation. When the right configurations exist, the pipeline moves. When they don't, national brands remain in an observational mode that can extend indefinitely.

West Side Access and the Grocery Gap

West side residents continue to experience limited access to grocery and family-oriented dining following the closure of Sparkle Market, a loss that came up repeatedly in community input. Survey respondents specifically called for a downtown or west side grocery option, including more affordable, walkable options for residents without reliable transportation, "Downtown could seriously benefit from a small, affordable grocery store, like Sparkle, for people that need to walk due to lack of transportation." - Female, aged 50-59 (2025 Salem Growth Survey). Both the city and the SOD Center are aware of the challenges accessing groceries for residents on the West side and several options and solutions are being explored and courted by local leaders to address this concern.

Targeted Small Business Support

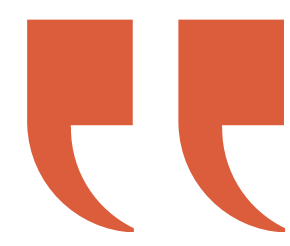
Small businesses form the backbone of Salem's commercial identity, and their health is a direct indicator of the district's overall vitality. While new

small businesses are starting and expanding in Salem each year, many stakeholders noted persistent barriers to success, including limited access to capital, staffing and labor retention challenges, low marketing capacity, and structural supports to attract customers. Residents who participated in the survey expressed both loyalty to local businesses and a desire to see them better supported, with several specifically noting the tension between welcoming national chains and protecting the small businesses that have long anchored the community's sense of place.

CONCLUSION

Looking ahead, the most significant concern is that high-demand retail categories will continue to leak spending outside Salem if the city is unable to secure operators that meet immediate needs in food service, essential goods, and home-related retail. Persistent leakage not only impacts local tax revenue but also limits the cultivation of a more complete commercial ecosystem. Recruitment timetables may also be influenced by site availability; delays in producing the right building configurations could extend the time national brands remain in an observational mode rather than moving into active site selection. For West side neighborhoods, the absence of grocery and convenience dining options could prolong inequities in retail access. Importantly, Salem's improved

recruitment practices, stronger market data, and clearer development priorities position the city well to address these issues over the coming years.



Supporting and retaining small businesses is a top priority. National chains are moving in, and while they bring convenience, they sometimes hurt long-standing local businesses that have supported schools, sports teams, and community events for decades. The city should prioritize policies, programs, and events that give small businesses the visibility and support they need to thrive.

*- Female, aged 30-39
(2025 Salem Growth Survey)*

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMMERCIAL AND RETAIL BETWEEN 2026-2031:

- Attract desired retail.
- Partner with Retail Strategies to target desired retail, with a focus on the West side and East side.
- Maintain a real-time catalog of retail-ready properties with essential specs to accelerate prospect matching.
- Explore bringing a new grocery store or food options to the West side of town.
- Create a digital packet with local incentives, processes, and contact information.
- Launch a city-wide marketing campaign to promote Salem as a destination for shopping and dining.
- Create more business incubation support, funding, and grant awareness programs for new and existing business owners.



CHAPTER 6 HOUSING

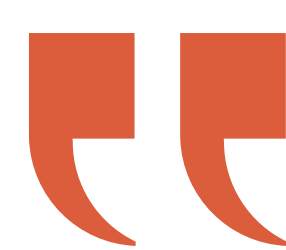
CURRENT OUTLOOK

Housing remains a central pillar of Salem’s long-term economic competitiveness. The condition, availability, and diversity of housing options directly influence the city’s ability to retain residents, support workforce resiliency, and attract the new families and young professionals the city needs to grow. While Salem faces challenges common to older communities, including aging housing stock, limited middle-range options, and rising rental demand, the next five years present a significant opportunity to modernize Salem’s housing landscape through targeted policy updates, strategic redevelopment, and a deliberate focus on expanding housing choice.

Salem’s housing patterns reflect decades of incremental development shaped by its historic core and surrounding neighborhoods. Downtown currently contains a limited number of residential units, primarily in second-floor apartments above commercial storefronts, with some underutilized third-floor spaces that hold strong redevelopment potential. Traditional single-family neighborhoods begin just one block outside the Central Business District, forming the east, west, north, and south neighborhoods that make up the majority of the city’s housing stock. These areas offer stability but also highlight opportunities for reinvestment, infill, and modernization.

THE RENTAL MARKET

Rental housing accounts for approximately 42% of Salem’s total housing stock, a proportion that reflects both the city’s economic profile and the relative accessibility of renting compared to homeownership for many residents (Best Neighborhood, 2023).



Home inventory is incredibly low. Seniors are electing to stay in their homes because of limited senior housing. Combine that with a huge wave of first-time home buyers and you have a huge need for more housing. Specifically, housing attractive to young adults and those starting a family.

– Male, aged 30-39
(2025 Salem Growth Survey)

Figure 7: Median rent in Salem

One-Bed Room	\$750-\$817
Two-Bed Room	\$891-\$990
Three-Bed Room	\$1206-\$1259
Four-Bed Room	\$1343-\$1430

Source: Rent Range (2025)

According to market analysis, on average a unit sits vacant on the market for just 25.3 days, and Salem has just a 4.1% rental unit vacancy rate (RentRange, 2025).

Median rents in Salem range considerably by unit size and type, differing by multi- or single-family dwellings. A one-bedroom unit runs approximately \$750 to \$817 per month depending on building type, while a two-bedroom averages around \$891 to \$990. Three-bedroom rentals sit near \$1,206 to \$1,259, and four-bedroom units reach \$1,343 to \$1,430. (See Figure 7). Rents have risen steadily across all unit types since 2020, with Salem's ZIP code seeing an increase of approximately \$40 over the past twelve months, tracking closely with statewide trends (RentRange, 2025).

For a community where median household income sits at \$50,250 (Lightcast Report, 2026), these figures are worth examining carefully. A household earning the city median and renting a two-bedroom single-family home at the market rate of \$990 per month would be spending roughly 24% of their gross income on housing, within the conventional affordability threshold, but leaving little margin for households earning below the median, and none at all for the roughly 27% of Salem households earning under \$25,000 per year (U.S. Census, 2020). Residents across income levels raised housing affordability as a personal concern in the 2025 Salem Growth Survey, with respondents specifically noting worry about being priced out of their current homes or rentals as costs continue to climb.



I struggle finding and/or affording basic housing, either renting or purchasing.

**– Male, aged 20-29
(2025 Salem Growth Survey)**

The availability of quality rental units compounds the challenge, especially as younger generations demonstrate increasing preference for long-term rental units rather than purchasing options. The pressure does not just affect residents and those

looking to move to Salem, but employers and potential businesses as well.

“There aren't houses available, not affordable houses at least. And it doesn't necessarily always mean homes to purchase, but also rentals. Its important employees have that. And when companies are looking at moving to an area, if there aren't housing units readily available, that's a real negative.”

– CEO of a Local Manufacturing Company

THE HOME PURCHASING MARKET

For many Salem residents, homeownership remains both a goal and a source of stability, and the city's purchase market tells a story that is in some ways more encouraging than its rental landscape. The median home value in Salem currently sits at approximately \$177,985, a figure that remains well below state and national medians and reflects the relative affordability that continues to draw buyers to the community (Zillow, 2026).

MEDIAN HOME VALUE IN SALEM IS \$177,985

Source: Zillow (2026)

According to survey respondents, housing affordability and the local market were among the top reasons people chose to relocate to Salem, with 8% of those who moved here citing the housing market specifically, placing it ahead of schools and on par with community ties as a motivating factor (Salem Growth Survey 2025). That affordability advantage is real, but it comes with important caveats. Much of Salem's owner-occupied housing stock was built before 1960 (Data Commons 2025), meaning that the sticker price of entry is often offset by the cost of maintenance, renovation, and modernization. For first-time buyers in particular, the gap between purchase price and move-in readiness can be a meaningful barrier, especially as construction and materials costs remain elevated. Several stakeholders interviewed for this plan noted that young buyers who are drawn to Salem's price point frequently encounter properties that require

investment beyond their immediate means.

Inventory constraints compound this challenge. The number of homes available for purchase at any given time remains limited, and competition for move-in-ready properties is intense relative to the city's size. The dynamic is self-reinforcing: seniors who might otherwise downsize are choosing to age in place, in part because suitable alternatives do not exist at accessible price points, which in turn keeps larger family homes off the market and out of reach for younger buyers.

Speaker 1: "Well it's housing stock, is what we find 99% of the time, keeps someone from moving to the area for work. They just can't find the house that fits. That middle-class house doesn't exist, at least not in volume."

Speaker 2: "Yeah, sometimes there are two houses and 15 people are fighting over them."

– Professional Services Stakeholders

Salem's cost of living index of 90.5 means the city remains genuinely competitive as a place to own a home relative to state and national benchmarks, and that advantage should not be taken for granted. Maintaining affordability while expanding the quality and diversity of available housing stock is the central tension this chapter's recommendations are designed to address.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Several persistent barriers continue to limit housing growth and reinvestment. Infrastructure and connectivity gaps, such as sidewalk deficiencies, outdated utilities, and road limitations, hinder the feasibility of new development in some areas. Certain parcels require environmental review, demolition, or substantial site preparation before they can support new housing. Awareness of housing incentives, including CRA programs, remains limited among both residents and developers, reducing uptake and slowing projects that could otherwise move forward.

Infrastructure and Site Readiness

Many of Salem's most logical infill locations carry hidden costs. Sidewalk deficiencies, aging utilities, and road limitations increase development risk, while certain parcels require environmental review or demolition before they can support new construction. Without public partnership or incentive support, these barriers are often enough to move a developer's attention elsewhere. Expanding awareness and uptake of tools like Community Reinvestment Area programs and Land Bank resources will be essential to unlocking sites that are otherwise stalled.

Zoning and the Missing Middle

Zoning restrictions significantly limit development of "missing middle" housing types, such as townhouses and various small-scale multifamily configurations, which are currently prohibited, preventing the city from responding to demand for modern formats that attract young families, professionals, and seniors seeking accessible alternatives. Until zoning reflects the new reality, the market will continue to underserve the residents who need it most.

"The mid-level housing is what you need. We ended up in the house we are in because it was the only house on the market that could support the size of our family. It was literally the only one. We had no other options when we moved."

–Local business owner

Rental Quality and Enforcement

The quality of Salem's rental stock varies considerably, and with a single housing inspector serving the entire city, consistent enforcement of maintenance standards is difficult to sustain. Residents raised this directly in community input, with one noting that some landlords only act when forced to. Expanding inspection capacity is not just a code enforcement question – it is a neighborhood stabilization question. This imbalance places strain on certain neighborhoods and highlights the need for expanded enforcement.

"I think we need a minimum of two full-time housing inspectors, and we've needed that for a long time. The current one is good but doing a lot. One person

cannot follow up on all the rentals.”

-Karen Carter, Salem Preservation Society

LOOKING AHEAD: PREPARING THE GROUNDWORK

While much of Salem’s housing work is in the early planning or discussion stage, foundational efforts are underway that will support future implementation. A comprehensive Housing Assessment and Strategic Plan is anticipated to quantify needs, evaluate inventory, and guide zoning modernization, site prioritization, and incentive structure improvements.

A Columbiana County Land Bank Map and property inventory will be assembled as demolition records, city-owned lot lists, and rehab-eligible structures are identified. This expanded visibility will help Salem strategically cluster redevelopment opportunities and identify priority infill locations. Concurrently, discussions around target-area selections are helping shape future place-based revitalization efforts.

Prototypes

Early concept development work is exploring several missing-middle prototypes such as 1,100–1,400 sq ft ranch models and a potential cottage-court configuration, which could align with CRA incentives and workforce price points once zoning is updated. A working-group structure is expected as part of the broader implementation of the Economic Development Plan, ensuring cross-department coordination for housing priorities.

Downtown Housing Opportunity

Downtown Salem currently has limited residential supply, but this is also one of the city’s greatest opportunities for growth. The Plan prioritizes the activation and renovation of 2nd- and 3rd-floor spaces to create moderate- to upscale apartments that appeal to Millennials, Gen Z, and young professionals who value walkability, vibrant public spaces, and proximity to amenities. These units will help diversify the city’s rental offerings while serving as a catalyst for downtown economic activity and workforce attraction.

Trajectory and Opportunity

Salem’s housing trajectory balances realism with optimism. While the work ahead is significant, the opportunities are equally strong. Increasing total housing supply, modernizing zoning to support missing-middle development, improving rental oversight, and implementing targeted infill strategies will all contribute to a more diverse, resilient housing ecosystem. Through careful planning and coordinated action, Salem can stabilize neighborhoods, expand opportunities for residents of all ages, and support long-term economic vitality.

CONCLUSION

Housing is where Salem's broader economic ambitions become most personal. The ability to attract a young family, retain a longtime resident, or welcome a new worker depends in no small part on whether the right home exists at the right price in the right neighborhood. The challenges outlined in this chapter are not unique to Salem, but the window to address them proactively – before demand outpaces the city's capacity to respond – is open now and will not stay open indefinitely.

The recommendations that follow are designed to move Salem from assessment to action: modernizing the policy environment, expanding housing choice across income levels and life stages, and ensuring that the city's most promising redevelopment opportunities are met with the tools and partnerships needed to see them through.



If we could get more middle housing stock, I think we would attract more people, which would attract more business. Housing and manufacturing growth work together.

- CEO of Local Company



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR HOUSING BETWEEN 2026-2031:

Strategic Planning & Assessment

- Facilitate the creation of a comprehensive housing assessment and strategic plan to address gaps in housing stock.
- Provide an annual inventory report identifying vacant or underutilized structures suitable for residential redevelopment.

Housing Supply Growth & Infill Development

- Attract developers to construct diverse housing options: townhouses, condos, apartments, and middle housing.
- Develop and implement an infill program for small to midsize housing targeting first-time homebuyers.
- Explore opportunities to convert vacant structures into apartment housing.
- Promote second- and third-floor residential development downtown. (Also in Chapter 4: Downtown)

Zoning & Policy Modernization

- Update zoning codes to allow townhouses and multi-family developments.

Incentive Promotion & Developer Engagement

- Promote incentives for residential development and provide bi-annual updates on available programs.
- Develop promotional materials to attract developers and support project planning.

Rental Housing Quality & Enforcement

- Enforcement of housing code.
- Enforce rental property maintenance standards citywide. (Also in Chapter 9: City Administration)
- Evaluate the expansion of the City Housing Department.
- Increase the percentage of rental inspections annually.

Target Area Redevelopment & Coordination

- Identify 1-2 priority redevelopment areas for concentrated infill and rehabilitation efforts.
- Use the Land Bank Map and inventory to cluster opportunities and support site prioritization.

CHAPTER 7

WORKFORCE AND EDUCATION

CURRENT OUTLOOK

Workforce development is a central economic priority for Salem. Over the past five years, employers have advanced technologies and raised expectations for job-readiness, applied problem-solving, and industry-recognized credentials. Salem’s competitiveness will depend on how well the community aligns the quality-of-life priorities to support residents with clear pathways into high-paying, future-focused careers. As one local employer summarized, “We’re always looking for young people, that’s our thing. And we’ve been raising that for years. It’s getting the young workforce, training them well, and that’s going to continue.”

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AS AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PRIORITY

National trends reinforce the importance of treating workforce development as a core economic development function. High-performing regions succeed when employers, education systems, training providers, and public entities work in close partnership to align credentials, skills, and training pathways with economic growth priorities. States and regions that invest in people, support credential attainment, enhance productivity, and create clear returns on investment for both workers and employers consistently lead in job creation and competitiveness.

This collaborative approach mirrors the structure of Salem’s workforce ecosystem. Locally, incumbent

worker training is delivered through the SOD Training Center and the Technical Training Center, which provide responsive, employer-aligned skill development. Flying High expands access by supporting adults in recovery and at-risk adults in gaining job-ready skills. Salem City Schools strengthen academic readiness and provide enrichment opportunities and pathways that position youth for successful careers.

Regionally, Salem benefits from a broad and well-connected talent network that includes Lake to River, MCTA, CCCTC, MCCTC, Kent State Salem, Youngstown State University, YBI, MVMC, OhioMeansJobs, and other partners who provide training, credentials, and access to career opportunities across all stages of life*. With this strong ecosystem, workforce development in Salem and the surrounding region can be a powerful engine for economic growth, business attraction and retention, and increased career mobility for residents.



GLOSSARY

Lake to River Economic Development a private, nonprofit organization.

MCTA: Mahoning and Columbiana Training Association.

CCCTC: Columbiana County Career and Technical Center.

MCCTC: Mahoning County Career and Technical Center.

Kent State Salem offers associate and bachelor’s degree programs at the local campus.

Youngstown State University offers undergraduate and graduate programs roughly 20 miles from Salem.

YBI: Youngstown Business Incubator.

MVMC: Mahoning Valley Manufacturers Coalition.

Ohio Means Jobs is a coalition across Ohio providing services to job seekers and employers.

EXPANDING SALEM'S TECHNICAL SKILLS

THE SOD CENTER

The SOD Training Center and the SOD Technical Training Center together offer one of the most accessible and employer-responsive workforce training ecosystems available to a community of Salem's size. With a focus on safety training, new-hire onboarding, leadership development, workplace improvement, skills advancement, and soft skills/personal growth, the SOD Center functions as a facilitator, bringing professional, high-quality training to the region.

Many certifications through the Technical Training Center are TechCred eligible, meaning employers can apply for reimbursement through the State of Ohio's TechCred program.

TRAININGS INCLUDE:

Industrial and Technical Certifications

- AC/DC Certification
- Programmable Logic Controls (PLC)
- Fluid Power, Hydraulics, and Equipment Operation
- Sensor Technology
- GD&T at the ASME Y14.5-2009 Standard

Professional and Leadership Development

- Leadership Development
- Intermediate and Advanced Courses in Microsoft Excel
- Soft Skills and Workplace Improvement
- Weekly meetings of an HR Working Group

LEARN MORE

Connects to: www.sodcenter.com

CHANGE OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS

Salem has shifted from simply filling open positions to intentionally building a durable talent pipeline. Employers have increased their demand for applied technical skills, short-term credentials, and career-ready attributes. Students and early-career adults increasingly seek visible advancement pathways and real-world exposure to local career opportunities. Working families require supportive infrastructure, reliable childcare, after-school options, attainable housing, and stable transportation, to participate fully and progress in their careers.



COMING IN 2027: A NEW K-8 CAMPUS

In August 2025, Salem City School District broke ground on a new \$57 million Kindergarten to 8th grade school building (WKNB, 2024). The new development will be developed on a 67-acre site at Whinnery Farm on the southeast side of the city, with completion targeted for August 2027. The site was purchased over 35 years ago by the community foundation in hopes of future use for expanding Salem's facilities, now the original site, as well as an additional 24 acres of land purchased by the district, will allow for an expanded K-8 campus to meet the district's needs. The new facility will replace Buckeye, Reilly, and Southeast Elementary schools consolidating the district's K-8 students under a single, modern roof for the first time in the district's history (Construction Owners, 2024).

Funding for the project is shared between the State Facilities Construction Commission and local sources, including a 10-year, \$10 million pledge from the Salem Community Foundation (WKBN, 2024). The investment reflects deep, cross-sector confidence in Salem's educational future and in the community's long-term commitment to its children.

The project replaces school buildings ranging from 60 to 100 years old, and brings Salem's youngest learners into a facility designed for modern academic enrichment, workforce readiness pathways, and expanded community programming. Realizing the full potential of the new campus will require coordinated programming partnerships between the school district, the SOD Center, and community organizations in the years ahead.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

While Salem is well-positioned for progress, several interconnected factors continue to influence the city's ability to meet workforce needs. The challenge is not merely the number of available workers, but ensuring the right blend of skills, experiences, and support that enables residents to succeed.

Childcare and After-School Capacity

Limited childcare availability and gaps in after-school programming remain one of the most direct constraints on workforce participation in Salem. Groundwork Ohio estimates that in Columbiana County, 11.9% of a family's median annual income is spent on childcare, costing approximately \$10,000 a year (U.S. Department of Labor 2024, Groundwork Ohio 2025, National Database of Childcare Prices 2019-2022). When parents cannot secure reliable, affordable care, they cannot consistently show up for

training, take on full-time hours, or pursue advancement. This is not a peripheral quality-of-life concern; it is a structural barrier to labor force participation.



We don't have resources in place yet to make it happen, but I see a need for a safe place for the kids to go after school. We have some daycares. We have some school programming, but somewhere additional for kids to go for academic support, or mental and physical health support, or anything along those lines is important.

– Lisa Vittorio
The Brightside Project

Transportation Access

For a meaningful share of Salem's workforce, getting to a job, a training program, or a school is not a given. As detailed in Chapter 8, approximately one in four Salem households owns either one car or no car at all, and the city currently has no public transit options. A broken-down vehicle or a lost license can quickly become a job-ending event. Closing the gap to multimodal and diverse transit availability is essential to realizing the full potential of the talent already present in the community.

Rising Student Needs and School Capacity

Salem City Schools are navigating a growing range of student needs, including mental health, special education services, food security, and non-English speaking families. With **just 31.3% of kindergartners in Columbiana County demonstrating readiness for school** upon starting, the work of both teachers and administrators is increasing (Ohio Department of Education, 2023). The investments represented by the new K-8 campus and the high school wellness center are meaningful steps forward, but the full benefit of those facilities depends on sustained programming, increased socio-economic opportunities, and community partnerships in the years ahead.

Housing Availability

Salem's housing stock directly shapes its ability to attract and retain the workers its employers need. As explored in Chapter 6, the city currently lacks sufficient middle-range housing options, particularly multifamily units, townhouses, and smaller-footprint homes that appeal to younger workers, newcomers, and young families weighing a move to the community. For a prospective employee considering a job offer in Salem, the inability to find suitable housing is often the deciding factor in choosing another community instead. Workforce attraction and housing supply are not separate problems; they are the same problem viewed from different angles, and progress on one depends on progress on the other.

Poverty-Related Barriers

As noted in the Overview of Salem, approximately 19% of Salem residents live below the poverty line, and **child poverty is 32%** (U.S. Census, 2020). These rates have real consequences for workforce development: they increase demand for wraparound services, reduce the capacity of families to invest in training or credentialing, and can limit the geographic and occupational mobility of workers. Strategies that address income stability and reduce barriers to essential services are not separate from economic development; they are a prerequisite for it.

CONCLUSION

Salem's workforce strategy over the next five years should focus on strengthening the talent pipeline, improving family supports, and expanding opportunities that lead to higher-wage employment. The ecosystem already in place, from the SOD Training Center's employer-aligned certifications to the regional network of education and training partners, provides a stronger foundation than many communities Salem's size can claim. The opening of the new K-8 campus in 2027 adds to that foundation in a meaningful and lasting way.

Progress will depend on addressing the interconnected challenges outlined in this chapter alongside the broader priorities of housing, transportation, and community services explored throughout this report. Mentorship, internship, and apprenticeship programs; expanded childcare and after-school programming; regular employer engagement; and continued evolution of technical training offerings are all priorities for the planning period ahead.

Over the next five years, Salem has a strong opportunity to connect high-quality education, expanded family supports, modern training opportunities, and strong employer partnerships. By doing so, the community can attract new residents, retain young families, and prepare workers for the careers shaping the future economy. With a collaborative workforce ecosystem and shared commitment to people and skills, workforce development can drive economic growth and long-term prosperity for Salem.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR WORKFORCE AND EDUCATION BETWEEN 2026-2031:

Mentorship & Youth Development

- Develop mentorship and partnership programs with local businesses to retain and invest in youth.
- Create entrepreneurship clubs and incubator spaces for young professionals.
- Encourage volunteerism and entrepreneurship among youth.

Address Barriers to Workforce Participation

- Address poverty-related barriers to education and workforce participation through targeted programs, including transportation access and childcare availability.

Training & Education

- Support expansion of preschool and childcare offerings at the repurposed Southeast school building.
- Support afterschool programming and transportation solutions for working families.
- Expand targeted technical training through the SOD Training Center, expanding opportunities to SHS seniors to earn certifications and credentials in short-term programs.

Engagement & Collaboration

- Facilitate annual roundtable discussions with schools, city government, businesses, and community organizations.



CHAPTER 8 TRANSPORTATION

CURRENT OUTLOOK

Salem's road network has been a major focus of investment over the past 10 years, supported by the 0.25% income tax levy for street and sidewalk improvements, which was renewed for another five years by voters in May 2025. Under the levy, 163 roads had been paved presenting 44.8 miles of updated road infrastructure. As of May 2025, 69.8% of city streets have been paved since 2015. The levy renewal allowed the progression of plans to repave W. State Street, N Lincoln Ave. and smaller streets around the community in 2025, with additional improvements planned (2025 Levy Renewal Handout).

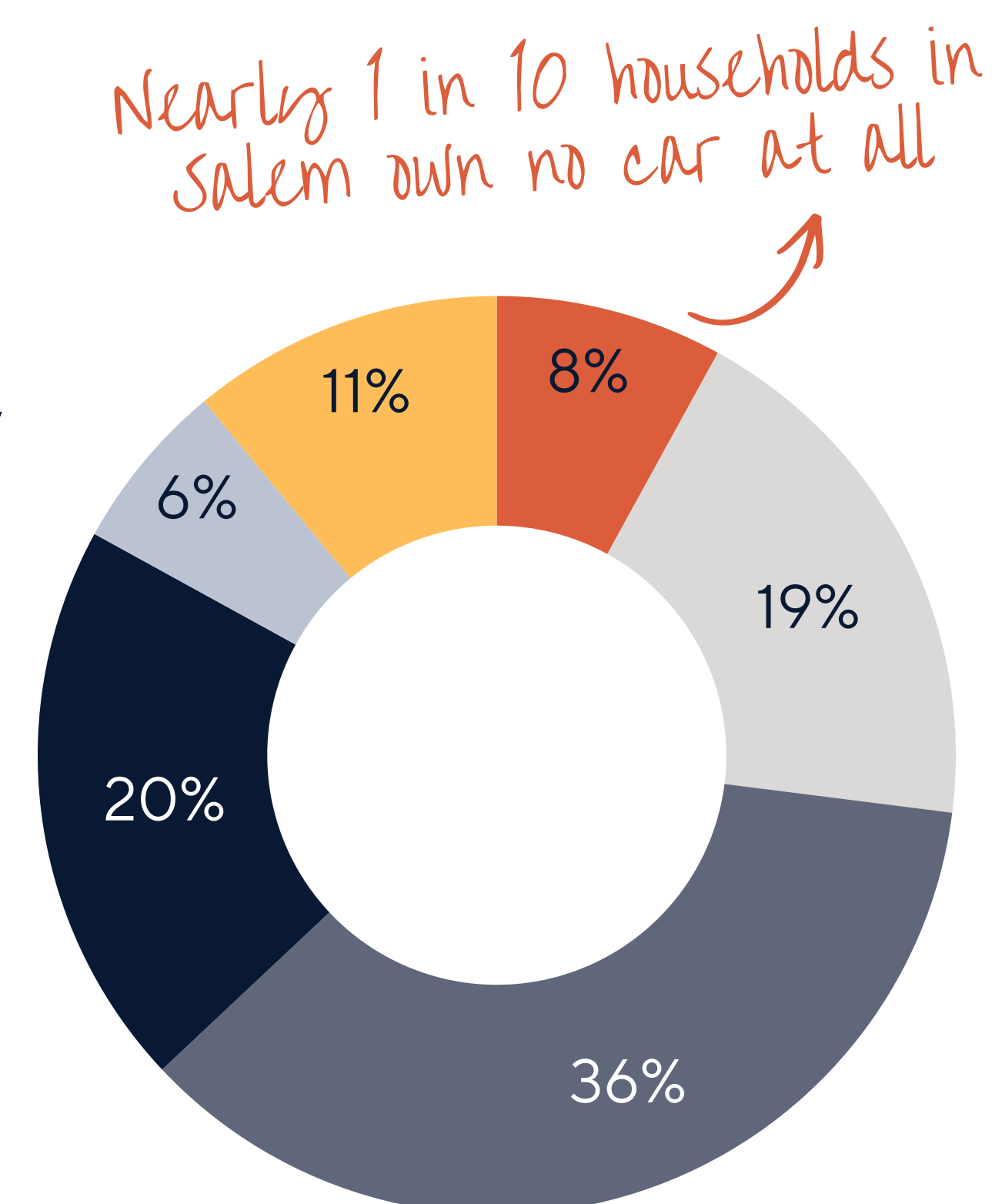
Salem's transportation infrastructure is built around road-based travel, reflecting its regional role as a commuter hub and industrial center. The city's road network supports daily commuting, freight movement, and local travel.

The vast majority of Salem residents, 81.9%, commute by car, while 6.1% carpool, and a notable 5.0% commute by bicycle (Census Reporter, 2026). The average commute time of ~21.9 minutes is relatively short by regional standards, and only 2.5% of residents face commutes exceeding 90 minutes, reflecting Salem's position as a strong employment center within Columbiana County (U.S. Census, 2020).

Vehicle ownership in Salem is high but not universal. 37% of households own three cars or more, 36% of

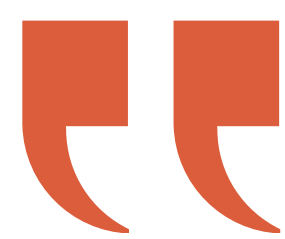
Figure 8: Car Ownership by Household

- No Car
- 1 Car
- 2 Cars
- 3 Cars
- 4 Cars
- 5+ Cars



Source: U.S. Census (2020)

households own two cars, and 19% own just one, but 8% of households own no car at all, nearly 1 in 10 households in Salem (U.S. Census, 2020). For roughly one-quarter of households, access to reliable transportation is not a given and the absence of robust transit alternatives means that a broken-down car, a lost license, or a physical limitation can quickly become a significant barrier to work, healthcare, groceries, and daily life. (See Figure 8). This reality surfaced repeatedly in both the community survey and stakeholder interviews.



Transportation is missing in Salem. Residents have no way of getting anywhere without owning a vehicle and many residents do not own a vehicle.

- Female, aged 50-59
(2025 Salem Growth Survey)

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Public Transit, Micro-Mobility, and Multi-Modal Options

Currently, Salem does not offer public transit options for residents. The lack of transportation alternatives, including micro- or multi-modal transportation offers such as ride-share, scooter-share, or bike-share programs was raised by many residents in the community survey and in the stakeholder interviews. Access to transportation was not just a concern among residents with mobility challenges, but also among workers, employers, and parents of children living within town. Many community members shared stories of personal challenges accessing groceries or work without a vehicle, with one explaining, "I live on the West side of town. When my car broke down and had to be repaired for a week, I had to rely on others to get to places like a grocery store and meetings due to lack of public transport or ride share services." Female, aged 40-49, Small Business Owner (2025 Salem Growth Survey).

Cycling is already a more significant mode of transportation in Salem than in many comparable communities, yet the infrastructure to support safe cycling lags behind demand. Downtown Salem currently lacks adequate secure bike parking, and existing ordinances create ambiguity around e-bikes and scooters that has made enforcement difficult and, in some cases, created safety conflicts on sidewalks and roadways.



We don't have bike racks downtown; they're technically illegal in Salem- it's a whole thing... I love to see kids out on scooters and bicycles and living healthy, active lives, but it's dangerous right now. Our sidewalks are not in good shape.

*- Sara Baer
Ward 1 City Council*

Residents who participated in the community survey expressed strong interest in expanded multi-modal options, with requests ranging from pedestrian zones and greenway trail connectivity to ride-share services and dedicated bike parking. This idea was further supported by downtown business owners and restaurateurs, with many owners expressing a desire for customers to be able to access shops in Salem with ease, especially in the summer and on nice days. These ideas reflect a genuine appetite for a more connected, active transportation environment; one that would serve both daily mobility needs and Salem's broader goals for downtown vitality and quality of life.



Would love to see an alley or two closed to traffic to create a bike/walking path to get across town. Better sidewalks- some are very dangerous. Any chance a trolley or some type of transportation could shuttle people from downtown to the east side?

*- Female, aged 60-69
(2025 Salem Growth Survey)*



Sidewalks, Walkability, and Pedestrian Infrastructure

Salem's walkability is supported by a network of parks, sidewalks, and public spaces, but coverage is uneven and infrastructure gaps persist across the city. While some neighborhoods have well-maintained pedestrian pathways, those along the east side residential and commercial corridors particularly lack consistent sidewalk access. These gaps directly affect residents' ability to reach schools, employment, and essential services on foot, and they disproportionately affect seniors, children, and residents without vehicles.

The question of sidewalk maintenance responsibility adds to another layer of complexity. In Salem, sidewalk upkeep is the responsibility of individual property owners, which causes challenges when damage, aging infrastructure, or weather-related conditions go unaddressed, particularly in winter.



Accessibility as far as sidewalks and walkways is important. There are some very busy, dangerous areas that probably do need them still. There are a lot of people without the ability to drive to where they need to go – to the grocery store, to work – and I don't just mean elderly people, I mean people of all ages and backgrounds.

*– Mitch Hendricks
Rotary Club President Elect*

Downtown, the city of Salem has progressed through Phase 1 of a sidewalk rehabilitation project between 2016-2024, investing approximately \$690,000 to renew infrastructure and improve mobility (Salem Street Levy Fast Facts, 2025). This first phase of the project was projected to replace nearly 28,500 square feet of public sidewalks. Phase 2 would see expanded investment around town.



Downtown Parking and Road Safety

Downtown hosts several free public parking lots in addition to street parking and several privately owned parking lots (See Figure 9). However, parking, wayfinding, and walkability awareness remain challenges, with business owners reporting they frequently hear customers say, “if a street parking spot isn’t available right outside your shop, I don’t come in”. Local businesses and city leaders who participated in the stakeholder discussions considered how to address these challenges, but while residents complain about a lack of access to parking, a local restaurateur noted, “There is so much free public parking in Salem and those lots are rarely full.”

For many self-identified, non-residents who took the 2025 Salem Growth Survey, Salem’s walkability is a charming feature, not a concern. And many stakeholders recommended leaning into this characteristic to encourage a more leisurely experience of the historic downtown, “a lot of visitors say it’s a ‘Park Once’ town. If you want to do something downtown, you can find free public parking, and as long as you’re able to get mobile, you can stop at multiple different kinds of places.” -Ben Ratner (Downtown Salem Partnership and co-owner of LiB’s Coffee).

However, as Salem promotes downtown walkability and tourism, State Street remains one of the most pressing road-specific concerns. As a primary through-corridor, it carries significant volumes of traffic, including heavy trucks, at speeds that multiple stakeholders described as unsafe for a downtown environment.

“If we’re going to continue to grow the downtown, if we’re going to continue to encourage foot traffic, we’re asking for tragedy if we don’t do something about the speed of the semis and through traffic on State street. I’ve seen way too many near misses. Just the other day I saw a woman fall stepping off the curb. She fell between two parked cars and her cane slid and a car went over the cane. If that had been her... it’s just scary to think about.”

- Local downtown business owner

Restaurants and shops along the corridor have noted the physical impact of truck traffic on their buildings, and the perception of high-speed through traffic undercuts Salem’s ongoing efforts to build a walkable, inviting downtown. Recommendations from community members included increasing enforcement, reducing speed, and doing more to route semitruck traffic towards the bypass, instead of through the middle of the city.

Figure 9: Public, Private, and Business-Only Parking in Downtown Salem, based on aerial imagery.



Source: Google Earth (2025)

Transportation for Seniors

Salem's seniors and residents with disabilities are currently served by CARTS (Community Action Rural Transit System), operated by the Community Action Agency of Columbiana County. CARTS provides origin-to-destination service across Columbiana County, connecting riders to healthcare appointments Monday through Saturday, 5 am to 8 pm. All trips must be scheduled at least 24 hours in advance, and service is demand-based, meaning schedules and availability vary (CAAOFCC, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Transportation is not simply an infrastructure issue; it is an economic development issue. Salem's ability to attract visitors, support businesses, retain residents, and remain competitive as a place to live and work depends on safe, accessible, and well-connected transportation systems.

Over the next five years, Salem plans to prioritize additional improvements towards its road and sidewalk network, with particular focus on high-traffic corridors and areas where gaps most directly limit access to employment, healthcare, and schools. Exploring expanded transit options, pursuing speed reduction measures, increasing enforcement would meaningfully improve mobility for the workers, seniors, and families who currently fall through the gaps. Bringing downtown bike infrastructure into compliance, clarifying ordinances for e-bikes and scooters, and adding secure bike parking would support both daily transportation and the active, walkable charm of Salem.

Salem has already demonstrated that its community will invest in transportation. The next step is channeling that commitment into a comprehensive, coordinated strategy that connects every resident to the city they call home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR TRANSPORTATION BETWEEN 2026-2031:

- Improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure; clarify ordinances for e-bikes and scooters.
- Improve mobility and accessibility: add sidewalks, bike lanes, and traffic calming measures; explore public transit options for seniors and workers.
- Evaluate current accessibility and condition of transportation infrastructure.
- Identify gaps in transportation infrastructure.
- Develop a plan to mitigate areas of concern and gaps in transportation infrastructure.
- Address speed limits and traffic calming measures downtown.
- Promote wellness through better sidewalks, bike paths, and multi-modal transportation options. (Also in Chapter 3: Healthcare and Wellness)



CHAPTER 9

CITY ADMINISTRATION AND PUBLIC SERVICES

CURRENT OUTLOOK

Salem's city government is aware of the gaps in internal processes and has made meaningful progress over the last five years to modernize operations and strengthen capacity through strategic hiring where possible. These improvements have been essential in supporting the city's broader economic development goals. However, as Salem grows, the demand for city administration continues to increase particularly around interdepartmental coordination, ordinance enforcement, and long-term funding sustainability.

At the same time, the city has increased its focus on securing grants and funding for major projects. Grant funding has enabled several capital improvements and supported essential municipal services. However, stakeholders have also highlighted the growing complexity of grant management, particularly as departments compete for limited funds and must navigate complex application and reporting processes.

PROGRESS SINCE 2021

Salem's administrative capacity has grown in real, tangible ways over the planning period. New hires in planning, public works, and administration have improved responsiveness and reduced bottlenecks that previously slowed permitting and project delivery. Stakeholders consistently noted that having the right people in the right roles makes a meaningful difference in day-to-day city functioning.

The city has also secured grant funding for a range of capital improvements that would not have been

possible through the operating budget alone. These investments have strengthened Salem's infrastructure and public services in ways that directly support quality of life and economic development.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Interdepartmental Coordination

One recurring theme from stakeholder conversations is that coordination across departments, though improving, remains uneven. Departments sometimes make decisions in isolation, creating gaps in communication around shared processes like event permitting, code enforcement, and public information. In community feedback, residents and business owners mentioned difficulty navigating city services, including accessing forms and guidance online.

One public official told of an ordinance passed to implement new permits and fees on food trucks setting up in the city, an effort to raise revenue. However, the department in charge of enforcing the new permit and collecting the fees was not consulted before the measure was passed by city council. The official explained, "We can't do that. Who's going to go out and say, 'hey you're out here today, I need \$137.50?' My department doesn't have the manpower for that. And we can't recoup the cost of babysitting."

Zoning, Code, and Ordinance Updates

One ongoing challenge is the effort to update and review existing zoning codes. Stakeholders consistently described this effort as necessary for supporting housing development, business expansion,

and downtown revitalization. Business owners and developers noted finding unclear and ambiguous guidance on permitting, enforcement expectations, and compliance requirements, or even struggling to find the newly passed ordinances because of delays in publishing and digitizing.



Last year we created a document for the tax abatement zones... everyone agreed it was a wonderful thing, and it was supposed to go up on the city hall webpage. It's been over a year and it's not there. I get calls from residents all the time looking for forms that aren't accessible or even digitized. This is a real concern for economic development.

– Sara Baer
Ward 1 City Council

Delayed access and outdated codes are challenges that were noted among stakeholders and city officials alike, creating confusion that can delay investment decisions and erode confidence. One city official even said that some of the code is no longer legal, and several city councilors mentioned antiquated codes reducing Salem's ability to attract new housing developments, public infrastructure improvements, or entrepreneurial businesses.

"I'd like ordinances not to be a book; I'd like them to be digitized. We just asked them to be updated more than once a year. We need two times a year – we did it just once last year and we were so far behind."

– Cyndi Baronzzi Dickey, Salem City Mayor

Safety Staffing and Administrative Capacity

Staffing remains among the most significant administrative challenges Salem faces, both in public

safety and across operational departments.

Stakeholders noted that staffing levels in public safety may not align with recommended ratios for a city Salem's size.

Staffing levels in public safety represent one of Salem's most pressing administrative challenges. The Salem Police Department currently employs 24 full-time officers, approximately 2.03 officers per 1,000 residents, below the 2.4 per 1,000 benchmark recommended for municipalities of Salem's size (FBI UCR 2025). The Salem Fire Department's bargaining unit of 15 staff falls well below the state average of 21.8 for comparably sized Ohio cities (SERB 2025). In the event of a single-family house fire, the NFPA 1710 national standard recommends 15 personnel respond to the initial call, a threshold Salem Fire Department currently falls significantly short of (NFPA.org). To make up the gap during a structural fire, the department requests callbacks and mutual aid from every volunteer department within a six-mile radius. Even so, Chief Mason noted that Salem Fire Department "experiences challenges obtaining the number of firefighters who are available, willing, and qualified to perform the required fire-ground operations".

SALEM POLICE DEPARTMENT

Current Safety Force

2.0 per 1,000 residents

Recommended benchmark

2.4 per 1,000 residents

SALEM FIRE DEPARTMENT

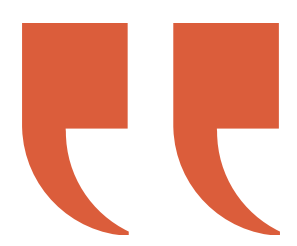
Current Safety Force

15 staff in the bargaining unit

Recommended benchmark

21.8 staff in a bargaining unit

Compounding these staffing gaps is aging equipment inventory for public city services, including maintenance machinery, emergency response vehicles, and public works tools. As equipment ages, repair costs increase and reliability decreases, which can lead to budget pressure and service risk. Without a stable, long-term plan for replacement, the city risks escalating costs and service delays.



I became chief in 2013 and was able to get some grants to replace some equipment, but that equipment is at the end of its life again. We're talking a couple hundred thousand dollars. We don't have it in the budget. Scott needs firemen. I need policemen. I'm sure other departments need things too. There's just not enough money to go around to be the professionals that the city expects.

*– J.T. Panezott
Salem Chief of Police*

Sustainable Funding Sources

As grant funding has become increasingly essential to Salem's public services delivery, the need for a more coordinated approach has grown. Departments sometimes pursue overlapping funding streams independently, creating internal competition and placing additional burden on already-stretched staff. A more centralized approach would reduce duplication, improve the quality of applications, and allow the city to pursue funding more strategically.

“So, I think one of the things that is most challenging is finding the resources, whether it's money, whether it's land, whether it's expertise to just get some of these things going. There are so many restrictions on money that is out there as far as what you can use it for, that sometimes we choose projects that maybe aren't our number one priority because it fit what we could do with that money.”

–Cyndi Baronzzi Dickey, Salem City Mayor

Accessibility and Distribution of Government Facilities

Several city facilities fall short of ADA accessibility standards, creating real barriers for residents with mobility challenges and older adults. This is not only a

legal concern but a service equity issue, as all residents should be able to access city offices and services without difficulty. Salem's own Health Commissioner, Kayla Crowl, put the lack of ADA compliant physical infrastructure plainly: "I don't know how our building is considered accessible. It's not. It is not handicapped accessible. And that needs to be a priority. We service so many different people, and people shouldn't have a hard time coming to us."

However, additionally discussed by city officials and departments heads was the lack of a central or shared office location. Various city departments are currently spread throughout the city, some departments rent unaccommodating spaces or floors in buildings downtown, others need expanded space yet have no capacity for a move. This forces not only residents to navigate around the city to access key public services, but city staff as well.

CONCLUSION

Salem's administrative foundation is stronger today than it was five years ago, and that progress is worth acknowledging. The city has made deliberate investments in staffing, modernized key processes, and pursued funding that has delivered real improvements for residents. The challenge ahead is not to reinvent what works, but to build on it with greater consistency and coordination.

The themes raised throughout this chapter point to a common thread: Salem's ambitions are outpacing the systems designed to support them. Closing that gap does not require dramatic restructuring. It requires clearer communication between departments, more predictable processes for residents and developers, a realistic plan for sustaining public safety and infrastructure, and a smarter approach to pursuing the outside funding the city depends on.

City administration is not a back-office function. It is the operational backbone of every economic development goal, every capital project, and every service Salem's residents rely on. When administration works well, it is largely invisible; permits move, services are accessible, departments communicate, and the city presents itself as a reliable partner for investment and growth. That is the goal everyone in the city is collectively working towards over the next five years.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR CITY ADMINISTRATION AND PUBLIC SERVICES 2026-2031:

- Develop a comprehensive marketing and promotional strategy to better showcase Salem's assets. (Also in Chapter 10: Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events)
- Fully digitize city ordinances, retire outdated codes, and reinforce necessary ones.
- Develop and enforce downtown building codes for safety and aesthetics.
- Enforce rental property maintenance standards citywide. (Also in Chapter 6: Housing)
- Continue to pursue grants for infrastructure improvements and housing initiatives.
- Evaluate long-term, sustainable funding options for city services.
- Develop a central tourism and events office to coordinate festivals, apply for tourism grants, and track tourism impact. (Also in Chapter 10: Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events)

CHAPTER 10

TOURISM, MARKETING, AND LOCAL EVENTS

CURRENT OUTLOOK

The story of Salem is one of rich history, charming development, and a core identity as a little big city. Positioned within easy reach of Cleveland, Youngstown, and Pittsburgh, the city offers something increasingly rare among small Midwestern communities: a historic, walkable downtown with genuine character, a growing calendar of community-driven events, and a local identity rooted in nationally significant history. Salem has a better story than it is currently telling. The gap is not in the assets. It is in the infrastructure and capacity to market them cohesively and consistently.

Marketing is not just about reaching potential visitors and tourists, it's also about attracting investors, employers, and developers to the community by highlighting Salem's distinctive charms, community strengths, and a vision for the future that others wish to join. As the chair of the Downtown Salem Partnership said, **"I think when people see success, they want to be a part of it. I think we're seeing that. Over the next few years, are there other people from outside that see this as an opportunity that can help spur movement? We have to think about 'how do we invite them in?'"**

Salem's Tourism Assets

Salem's signature events are the clearest evidence of its tourism draw. Freed Fest celebrates the city's rock and roll legacy with live music and community programming. The Salem Super Cruise brings four days of classic cars, hot rods, food vendors, and family activity to the city each summer. Recurring and one-off events such as the Makers Market, Farm Market, and previous Second Saturday programming create recurring reasons to be downtown throughout the

year. Together, these events function as community-building infrastructure as much as tourism drivers, generating meaningful foot traffic and economic activity for local businesses, restaurants, and retailers.

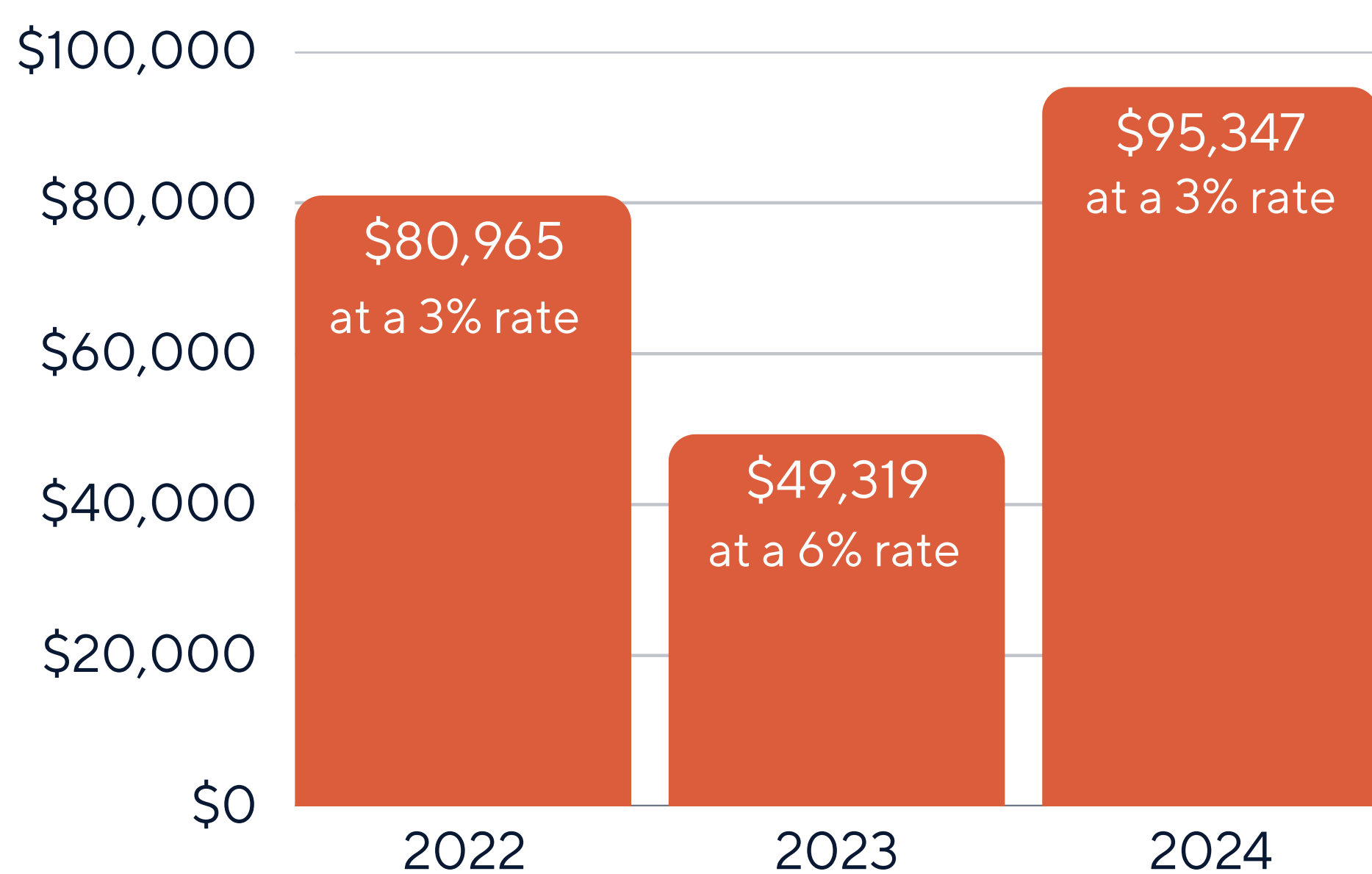
Coordination of Salem's tourism identity and promotion is currently shared among several organizations. The Tourism Advisory Board of Salem (TABS) supports promotion of the city's events and assets. The Downtown Salem Partnership (DSP) and the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce each contribute to outreach and business visibility. While these organizations are working toward shared goals, stakeholders consistently noted that the city's marketing voice remains fragmented, and that the full story of Salem is not yet being told with the consistency or reach it deserves.

Current Economic Benefits of Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events

Currently management of tourism and events is fractured across organizations, committees, and departments. This includes any formal tracking or research into the economic and social benefits of tourism, marketing, and local events. The next best available data to estimate the benefits of tourism in Salem is the city's lodging tax data, which offers a revealing window into the city's tourism momentum and its untapped potential.

Notably, Salem levied a lodging tax of 3% in 2024, half

Figure 10: Lodging Tax Revenue 2022-2024



Source: Salem City Lodging Tax Revenue, 2022-2024. Ohio Department of Taxation via Lake to River.

the 6% rate applied by several neighboring townships (Lake to River 2024). Elkrun Township, which reported the county's highest lodging revenues at \$103,681, operates at the higher rate with a fraction of Salem's amenities and attractions. These figures suggest that Salem's lodging tax revenue could grow substantially through increased visitor volume (See Figure 10). The tourism economy is moving in the right direction, even without a coordinated strategy to support it.

Formal tracking of annual visitor counts and total economic impact from tourism has not yet been established for Salem. **Estimates suggest the city may welcome upward of 200,000 visitors per year** (Business View Magazine, 2023) across its events, recreation areas, and downtown attractions, though this figure could not be independently verified. Establishing a reliable baseline, through visitor surveys, centralized event attendance counts and reporting, and lodging occupancy data is itself an early priority for the next five years, and would position Salem to measure progress, make the case for investment, and compete more effectively for tourism-related grants and partnerships.

"People love to come to small towns. They love a small-town escape, especially if you're from the city."

-Joshua Buck (Owner of State Street Records)

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Despite this momentum, several structural challenges limit Salem's ability to fully realize its tourism and

marketing potential. Community survey data and stakeholder interviews consistently named these as areas requiring coordinated investment and attention over the next five years.

Fragmented Marketing and the Absence of a Unified City Voice

Salem's marketing materials are currently scattered across multiple organizations, platforms, and individual business voices, each telling a version of their story within the city, but not the city's own story. Local business owners are active and enthusiastic advocates for Salem, but they are promoting their individual businesses, not the city as a whole. As stakeholders noted, what is missing is a single, consistent voice telling Salem's story: one that communicates what visitors will find when they arrive, highlights the depth and character of what is here, and reaches regional audiences who have not yet discovered the city.



The businesses all have our own voices, and we're all saying the positive things, and we're trying to promote each other, but it's still individual efforts. We don't have one voice that is championing Salem. And that's what's missing; telling the story that when you come here, you're not going to find all the chain restaurants, you're going to find mom and pop places that are owned and run by local residents. Salem really does have a unique story and nobody's telling that story. We're [business owners] all telling our own story the best we can, but someone needs to tell Salem's story.

-Local Business Owner

Without a unified brand identity, consistent visual language, messaging, and tone, Salem competes at a disadvantage against neighboring communities that present themselves more coherently to potential visitors and residents. The "Little Big City" instinct that has emerged organically among local stakeholders is a strong foundation. Additionally, community respondents to the Salem Growth survey identified "small town", "friendly" and "quaint" as top words residents use to describe Salem to those outside the community. These characteristics offer a strong foundation for potential coordinated marketing and branding on behalf of the city towards potential visitors, investors, and residents. It needs to be developed into a full, coordinated brand system.

Event Coordination and Capacity

Salem's event calendar is impressive for a city its size, but it is sustained largely by the dedication of volunteers and individual organizers working without strong central infrastructure. Scheduling conflicts, duplicated logistics, and resource strain are recurring consequences. Large-scale events require public safety staffing, road infrastructure, and coordination support that place real pressure on city departments. Without a dedicated coordination function, growth in

the event calendar is constrained by the limits of what volunteers and already-stretched city staff and budgets can absorb.

Wayfinding and Visitor Experience Infrastructure

Once visitors arrive in Salem, helping them navigate the city's parking, businesses, and historic sites is an area where investment would pay meaningful dividends. Stakeholders from the Downtown Salem Partnership and local business community highlighted the persistent challenge of parking perception: while Salem offers substantial free public parking downtown, many visitors and even local residents are not aware of where those lots are located. Additionally, signs or even billboards placed outside of town do not signal to passing traffic what is available within Salem, failing to divert potential passers-by into visitors. Improved wayfinding signage and visitor information resources would not only improve the experience for guests but would directly benefit local businesses by converting traffic more effectively.

Local Communication of City Initiatives

A recurring theme from community survey respondents was frustration at learning about events and city activities after the fact, often through social media, and too late to participate. This points to a communications gap that is distinct from tourism marketing but closely related: residents want to know what is happening in their city and to feel included in its civic and cultural life. Centralized, proactive communication from the city and its partner organizations about events, programs, and opportunities for involvement is part of what builds the kind of community pride that, in turn, makes Salem a more compelling destination for visitors.



Marketing doesn't have to be just for an event. Market who's here and what's here. Market the town!

–Tricia Ross
Owner of Nature Nurture



LOOKING AHEAD: THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

The next five years represent a genuine window of opportunity for Salem's tourism and marketing strategy. The lodging tax trajectory is moving in the right direction, the event calendar has real regional recognition, and the downtown has momentum that did not exist a decade ago.

One specific and time-bound opportunity deserves attention. The America 250 celebration in the summer of 2026 creates a moment of national interest in American founding history, heritage, and local stories. Salem's abolitionist legacy, its role in the women's suffrage movement, and its rock and roll origins are assets with genuine national resonance. Positioning Salem as a heritage tourism destination in the context of this national conversation through coordinated programming, regional outreach, and targeted marketing is an opportunity that merits dedicated attention in the near term.

Longer term, establishing a reliable baseline for tourism data would allow Salem to measure progress, demonstrate return on investment, and compete more effectively for state and regional tourism funding. Communities that can demonstrate tourism impact attract more support for it. That data infrastructure does not yet exist in Salem, and building it is among the most practical first steps available.

Stakeholders also noted that Salem's unique attributes including its affordability, its small-town character, and its unique, locally owned businesses are precisely what urban visitors are looking for, and that targeted marketing to regional metro audiences in Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Youngstown represents an accessible and cost-effective strategy for growing visitor volume without requiring Salem to compete with larger destination cities on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

Marketing and tourism rose to the surface of this planning process not because the SOD Center placed them on the agenda, but because the community did. Residents, business owners, and civic leaders across every sector of the stakeholder consultation raised the

same concern: Salem has more to offer than the outside world knows, and the city is not yet organized to tell its story at the scale the story deserves.

That is both a challenge and an opportunity. The assets are real. The momentum is genuine. The community is engaged and proud. What is needed now is the coordination infrastructure: the unified brand, the dedicated capacity, the data systems, and the wayfinding tools to allow Salem to present itself consistently, welcome visitors effectively, and grow its tourism economy in a way that directly benefits local businesses and residents. The next five years offer a realistic window to build that foundation. With intentional, collaborative investment, Salem can ensure that the rest of the region, and beyond, knows exactly what our community has to offer.





RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR TOURISM, MARKETING, AND LOCAL EVENTS 2026-2031:

Tourism & Events

- Develop a central tourism and events office to coordinate festivals, apply for tourism grants, and track tourism impact. (Also in Chapter 9: City Administration)
- Expand arts, culture, and entertainment offerings, including galleries, museums, and family-friendly activities.
- Increase community events and festivals (e.g., winter Kringle market in public parks). (Also in Chapter 4: Downtown)

Unified Communication Strategy

- Develop a comprehensive marketing and promotional strategy to better showcase Salem's assets. (Also in Chapter 9: City Administration and Public Services)
- Create a centralized communication hub – develop a dedicated section on the City website for economic development updates, events, and resources.
- Publish regular newsletters and maintain a social media calendar.
- Create feedback channels (surveys, town halls) for two-way engagement.
- Develop a unified brand identity (logo, tagline, color scheme), including promotion of the Little Big City identity.
- Segment messaging for residents, newcomers, and visitors.
- Secure funding for 2 digital kiosks downtown to promote wayfinding and walkability. (Also in Chapter 4: Downtown)
- Highlight wins: new businesses, expansions, infrastructure improvements, and other community progress.

Public Relations & Collaboration

- Form a communications task force with city, business, and community leaders to ensure consistent messaging.
- Build media partnerships for positive coverage.
- Host quarterly networking events to strengthen organizational collaboration and amplify outreach across SOD, the Chamber, Downtown Salem Partnership, the City, and Tourism.
- Share annual economic reports and progress metrics.
- Publicize success stories and upcoming projects through press releases and social media.

Marketing

- Launch a campaign focused on Salem's affordable living and exceptional quality.
- Use cost-of-living comparisons, testimonials, and videos to counter misconceptions.
- Promote affordability through infographics and social media ads.
- Implement interactive video kiosks downtown as a pilot project.
- Expand kiosks to the East, West, and North ends of the city with grant funding and sponsorships.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Five years ago, Salem's first economic development plan set out a framework for coordinated growth. The results since then have been well-documented throughout this report, and they deserve acknowledgement. The progress was not accidental. It came through deliberate investment and sustained partnership between the City of Salem, the SOD Center, community organizations, employers, and residents who chose to stay engaged and committed to Salem's future. Downtown vacancies cut by 77%, building permit timelines reduced from six months to six days, 163 roads paved, \$2.3 million in competitive grants secured for downtown rehabilitation, and Salem's national ranking among U.S. micropolitan areas climbing from 84th to 12th. These are documented results that speak to a community that is committed to doing the hard, but necessary work to continue developing together.

This second plan is built on that foundation, but it also takes a more reflective approach to the challenges ahead. The boundaries of economic development have shifted, and the plan for the coming five years is adapting with this change. With that, a renewed sense of civic momentum came through consistently in both the community survey and stakeholder conversations, and we hope that was evident across every chapter of this plan.

WHAT THIS PROCESS MADE CLEAR

The community input gathered for this report, from 593 survey respondents and more than 40 stakeholders across 12 sectors, revealed intersectional challenges that Salem must address to continue to grow successfully by 2031. What this plan makes clear, chapter by chapter, is that the challenges limiting

Salem's next stage of growth are not separate problems waiting for separate solutions. A manufacturer cannot fill a position because there is no housing nearby for the worker they need. A downtown business depends on residential density that current zoning does not permit. A training program cannot be accessed without affordable childcare or reliable transit. These are not abstract concerns, they are the daily operating conditions of Salem's economy, and they do not resolve sector by sector.

Salem's advantages are real. With a cost-of-living index of 90.5, housing costs 17.2% below the national average, and healthcare costs 20.1% below, these are genuine competitive assets in a regional market where affordability is increasingly rare. However, what the community shared repeatedly is that affordability alone does not attract or retain residents if the housing types they need simply do not exist. The city faces a projected shortfall of approximately 316 units by 2030, concentrated in the middle-housing formats that current zoning does not permit. The \$305 million in annual unmet consumer demand identified by Retail Strategies represents spending that leaves Salem every year across categories residents said they would rather access locally. Public safety staffing falls below recommended benchmarks for a city of Salem's size. More than 20% of residents are over 65, and the healthcare workforce required to serve that population is already under strain.

These are not emerging risks. These are current conditions that the recommendations in this plan are designed to address directly. And they reinforce, more than anything else, that Salem's path forward requires coordination across sectors, not action in silos.

THE INTERCONNECTED PATH FORWARD

Progress in the next five years will be strongest where it has always been strongest in Salem: where roles are clearly defined, where partners are aligned around shared goals, and where sequencing is thoughtful enough to remove bottlenecks before they stall momentum. The most important early investments are those that create the conditions for everything else — site readiness that unlocks industrial growth, zoning updates that open the door to housing development, and coordination infrastructure that allows marketing and tourism to function as a unified, revenue-generating effort for the city.

Housing, workforce, transportation, healthcare, and quality of life do not move separately. They move together or they stall together. This plan acknowledges that. The recommendations across all ten chapters are designed to reinforce one another, and implementation will require the same cross-sector thinking that shaped the research behind them.

What is genuinely exciting about this moment is not just the plan itself, but the growing interest in Salem. Progress is visible, and when progress becomes visible, people want to be part of it. We are seeing renewed energy from entrepreneurs, employers, residents, developers, and community advocates who are choosing to invest their time, trust, and resources here. That energy is a resource too, and it should be met with coordination infrastructure worthy of it.

IMPLEMENTING THIS PLAN COLLABORATIVELY

Effective implementation will require cross-departmental coordination, annual progress reviews, and clear accountability across each recommendation area. It will also require honest acknowledgment that not everything can happen at once. This plan offers a framework, but not a mandate. It is intended to be a living document: one that is reviewed, adapted, and informed by ongoing community input as conditions change over the next five years.

The SOD Center's role in implementing this plan

reflects that same integrated philosophy. In the years ahead, the SOD Center will lead implementation by working alongside the City of Salem, local employers, institutions, and community organizations to translate recommendations into action. This means coordinating cross-sector working groups, connecting funding opportunities to the priorities outlined here, tracking progress against measurable goals, and continuing to ensure that the community's voice remains central to how strategies evolve over time.

Critically, implementation will require more than good planning; it will require sustained commitment and shared responsibility. It will require participation from residents, business owners, educators, employers, investors, and civic leaders, because this plan will only succeed if it continues to be shaped by the people it is meant to serve.

A SHARED VISION FOR OUR LITTLE BIG CITY

Salem enters the 2026–2031 planning period with stronger assets, clearer priorities, and deeper community investment than at any point in recent memory. The work ahead is significant. But if the last five years have demonstrated anything, it is that this community is capable of doing hard things well.

The path forward will require patience and persistence alongside the ambition this community has already demonstrated. But the foundation is real, the momentum is genuine, and the community is engaged. That is more than most cities of Salem's size can claim — and it is the right place from which to build.

Thank you to everyone who contributed their time, expertise, and perspective to shaping this plan. And to everyone who will help bring it to life: this is your community too, and its future depends on what we choose to build together.

ALL RECOMMENDATIONS

for Salem between 2026-2031

MANUFACTURING AND INDUSTRY

Expand Salem's Industrial Park

- Develop and implement a redevelopment plan for Heavy and Light Industrial zoned properties not in use.
- Develop and implement a plan for site-ready development of city acreage including securing environmental approval to develop sites.
- Formulate a budget to prepare shovel-ready sites based on environmental review and secure funding for ready projects.
- Pursue annexation or redevelopment of underutilized properties to address land constraints for industrial growth.

Support Industrial Growth

- Coordinate public-private partnerships for larger development, including identifying sites and property owners.
- Invest in infrastructure upgrades – water, sewer, transportation, and energy – to support industrial expansion.
- Provide funding sources to assist site and infrastructure upgrades.

Develop Incentive Promotional Materials to Attract Manufacturers

- Improve messaging on tax incentives, including the Community Reinvestment Area (CRA), and streamline site approval processes for developers.
- Develop incentive promotional materials and an onboarding process targeting potential manufacturers.
- Market Salem's industrial park, industrial sites, and industrial sector to attract new industries and support local business expansion.
- Develop partnerships to attract higher-wage manufacturing jobs and advanced technology industries, including hosting annual roundtables or tours of available sites.
- Maintain a local Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) program.

HEALTHCARE AND WELLNESS

- Support healthcare workforce recruitment and retention programs.
- Improve ADA accessibility in public buildings and facilities. (Also in Chapter 9: City Administration and Public Services)
- Leverage the USA's 250th anniversary for health-focused community events and branding.
- Promote wellness through better sidewalks, bike paths, and multi-modal transportation options. (Also in Chapter 8: Transportation, Road Safety, Parking, and Multi-modal Mobility)

DOWNTOWN

- Promote policies and programs that discourage prolonged building inactivity and support property owners in keeping storefronts actively maintained and engaged.
- Develop and implement a targeted recruitment strategy to proactively attract desired downtown businesses that align with community needs, market demand, and existing district character, with a focus on filling remaining vacant storefronts.
- Evaluate the feasibility of a downtown retail incubator to support startup and early-stage businesses through shared space, reduced startup costs, technical assistance, and short-term leases designed to transition successful concepts into permanent storefronts.
- Improve wayfinding signage and parking awareness; consider a "Park Once" campaign to encourage walkability.
- Improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure; clarify ordinances for e-bikes and scooters.

(continued on the next page →)

DOWNTOWN (CONTINUED)

- Improve mobility and accessibility: add sidewalks, bike lanes, and traffic calming measures; explore public transit options for seniors and workers.
- Evaluate current accessibility and condition of transportation infrastructure.
- Develop a plan to mitigate areas of concern and gaps in transportation infrastructure.
- Promote second- and third-floor residential development downtown. (Also in Chapter 6: Housing)
- Secure funding for 2 digital kiosks downtown to promote wayfinding and walkability. (Also in Chapter 10: Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events)
- Add third spaces (benches, outdoor seating) to encourage downtown activity.
- Increase community events and festivals (e.g., winter Kringle market in public parks). (Also in Chapter 10: Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events)

COMMERCIAL AND RETAIL

- Attract desired retail.
- Partner with Retail Strategies to target desired retail, with a focus on the West side and downtown.
- Maintain a real-time catalog of retail-ready properties with essential specs to accelerate prospect matching.
- Explore bringing a new grocery store or food options to the West side of town.
- Create a digital packet with local incentives, processes, and contact information.
- Launch a city-wide marketing campaign to promote Salem as a destination for shopping and dining.
- Create more business incubation support, funding, and grant awareness programs for new and existing business owners.

HOUSING

Strategic Planning & Assessment

- Facilitate the creation of a comprehensive housing assessment and strategic plan to address gaps in housing stock.
- Provide an annual inventory report identifying vacant or underutilized structures suitable for residential redevelopment.

Housing Supply Growth & Infill Development

- Attract developers to construct diverse housing options: townhouses, condos, apartments, and middle housing.
- Develop and implement an infill program for small to midsize housing targeting first-time homebuyers.
- Explore opportunities to convert vacant structures into apartment housing.
- Promote second- and third-floor residential development downtown. (Also in Chapter 4: Downtown)

Zoning & Policy Modernization

- Update zoning codes to allow townhouses and multi-family developments.

Incentive Promotion & Developer Engagement

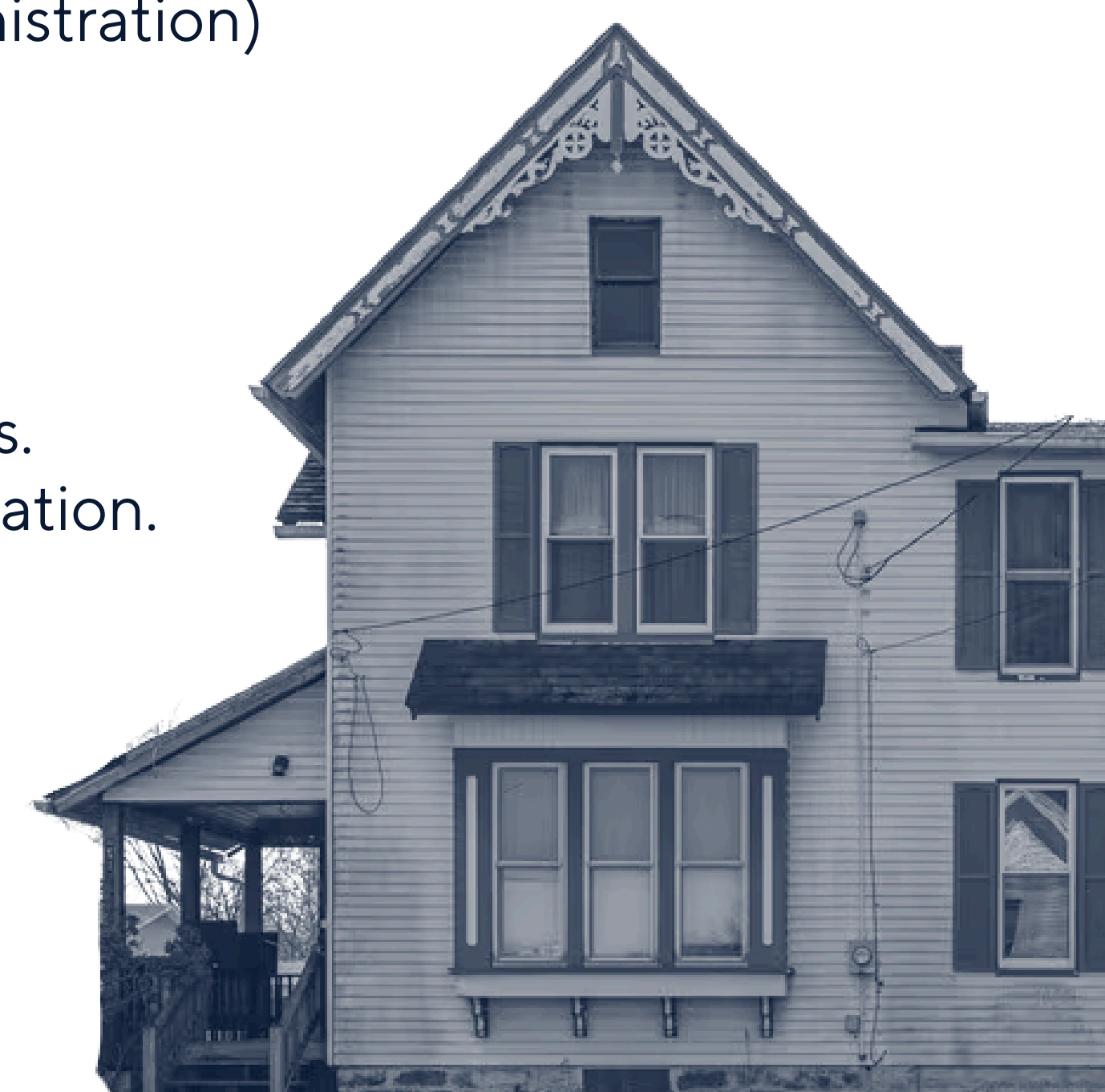
- Promote incentives for residential development and provide bi-annual updates on available programs.
- Develop promotional materials to attract developers and support project planning.

Rental Housing Quality & Enforcement

- Enforcement of housing code.
- Enforce rental property maintenance standards citywide. (Also in Chapter 9: City Administration)
- Evaluate the expansion of the City Housing Department.
- Increase the percentage of rental inspections annually.

Target Area Redevelopment & Coordination

- Identify 1–2 priority redevelopment areas for concentrated infill and rehabilitation efforts.
- Use the Land Bank Map and inventory to cluster opportunities and support site prioritization.



WORKFORCE AND EDUCATION

Mentorship & Youth Development

- Develop mentorship and partnership programs with local businesses to retain and invest in youth.
- Create entrepreneurship clubs and incubator spaces for young professionals.
- Encourage volunteerism and entrepreneurship among youth.

Address Barriers to Workforce Participation

- Address poverty-related barriers to education and workforce participation through targeted programs, including transportation access and childcare availability.

Training & Education

- Support expansion of preschool and childcare offerings at the repurposed Southeast school building.
- Support afterschool programming and transportation solutions for working families.
- Expand targeted technical training through the SOD Training Center, expanding opportunities to SHS seniors to earn certifications and credentials in short-term programs.

Engagement & Collaboration

- Facilitate annual roundtable discussions with schools, city government, businesses, and community organizations.

TRANSPORTATION

- Improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure; clarify ordinances for e-bikes and scooters.
- Improve mobility and accessibility: add sidewalks, bike lanes, and traffic calming measures; explore public transit options for seniors and workers.
- Evaluate current accessibility and condition of transportation infrastructure.
- Identify gaps in transportation infrastructure.
- Develop a plan to mitigate areas of concern and gaps in transportation infrastructure.
- Address speed limits and traffic calming measures downtown.
- Promote wellness through better sidewalks, bike paths, and multi-modal transportation options. (Also in Chapter 3: Healthcare and Wellness)

CITY ADMINISTRATION AND PUBLIC SERVICES

- Develop a comprehensive marketing and promotional strategy to better showcase Salem's assets. (Also in Chapter 10: Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events)
- Fully digitize city ordinances, retire outdated codes, and reinforce necessary ones.
- Develop and enforce downtown building codes for safety and aesthetics.
- Enforce rental property maintenance standards citywide. (Also in Chapter 6: Housing)
- Continue to pursue grants for infrastructure improvements and housing initiatives.
- Evaluate long-term, sustainable funding options for city services.
- Develop a central tourism and events office to coordinate festivals, apply for tourism grants, and track tourism impact. (Also in Chapter 10: Tourism, Marketing, and Local Events)



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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

COMMUNITY SURVEY

Data Collection

Survey invitations were distributed through multiple channels to maximize reach and accessibility, including:

- Email and social media outreach, reaching community members.
- Distribution of printed flyers through local businesses, community organizations, and industry partners.
- Newspaper coverage in local newspapers.

Over an 8-week period, 593 participants completed the survey. To support inclusivity and reduce barriers to participation, the survey was made available online or via paper submission.

Data Analysis

While the sample is not statistically representative of the entire Salem population, several steps were taken to strengthen the reliability of the findings. Survey weights were applied to adjust for oversampling and improve representativeness across key demographic variables. Data was cleaned to remove duplicate responses. Participation reflected broad representation across age groups, educational attainment, and annual income levels when compared to the City's 2019 community survey, despite an overrepresentation of respondents self-identifying as female.

Survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends, rankings, and areas of consensus across respondents. Results were disaggregated where appropriate to explore differences between residents, workers, and those who both live and work in Salem.

Text-based responses were analyzed by first applying specific sub-codes to each response. These sub-codes were then organized under "parent" codes based on general theme and focus. The relationships between these codes and their themes were then mapped and networked to explore the relationship between common concerns.

Quantitative findings were interpreted alongside qualitative data to ensure that numerical trends were grounded in community context. This mixed-methods approach strengthened the reliability of conclusions and helped identify actionable opportunities that align with lived experience.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Data Collection

Qualitative data for this report was collected through over 12 semi-structured focus groups with key stakeholders across the Salem community. Interview participants were selected to represent a range of perspectives and sectors, including but not limited to local business owners, nonprofit leaders, educators, healthcare providers, city staff, elected officials, developers, and residents. This approach ensured that the data reflected both institutional knowledge and lived-experience within the community.

Interviews explored topics such as community assets and challenges; housing and workforce dynamics; downtown vitality; retail and small business conditions; city services and administration; and long-term community concerns. While a consistent interview guide was used, conversations were intentionally flexible to allow participants to raise emerging issues and provide deeper context specific to their expertise and experiences.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed using both Otter and manual transcription. Transcripts were reviewed and analyzed by the lead researcher using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and relationships across participants and sectors through inductive and deductive qualitative coding in the software QDA Miner.

As is typical in qualitative analysis, the purpose is not quantity of data points, but to provide a deep and holistic analysis of core themes, challenges, and perspectives among consulted stakeholders. Thus, this thematic analysis resulted in an aggregated summary of major themes, with coding focused on both frequency and salience, ensuring that less common but highly impactful issues were not overlooked and overarching, less tangible themes were defined. The final network map of parent and sub codes was developed to reflect the qualitative findings of these focus groups.

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

COMMUNITY SURVEY

1. Do you currently live, work, or shop in Salem? [yes | no]
2. Do you live in Salem? [yes | no], 4. How long have you lived in Salem? 5. Why did you move to Salem?
6. Do you work in Salem? [yes | no]
7. What 3 words do you use to describe Salem? [text boxes provided]
8. How do you feel about Salem's economic development progress in the last 5 years?
 - 1= Declining Economic Climate, 2= Stagnant Economic Climate, 3 = Efforts at Progress, but slow movement, 4= Progress is heading in the right direction, 5= Salem is booming!, 0= Unsure/Other: [short text box]
9. and 10. How well do you believe Salem does in the following categories and services?
 - 1= Needs Improvement 2= Meets my Expectations 3=Exceeds my Expectations 0= unsure/I don't use this

Quality of Life

- Parks/Outdoor recreational opportunities
- Shopping options
- Restaurant options
- Public Safety
- Community foundations
- Service clubs, organizations and churches
- Arts, events, and festivals
- Parking availability downtown
- Pedestrian friendly and walkability
- Downtown attractiveness
- Salem Public Library
- Salem Community Center

Economic Development

- Home rental options
- Home purchasing options
- New development of housing
- Housing affordability
- Educational, job, and technological training opportunities
- Employment opportunities
- Attracting industries
- Police & Fire Services
- Salem Regional Medical Center
- Salem City Schools
- Post-secondary education options
- Trash and recycling Services
- City governance and infrastructure
- Weather and Disaster Response

11. What areas of Salem would you like to see the city prioritize for development in the next 5 years (Choose 3)
 - [Housing; Healthcare and Wellness; Education and Workforce Training; Job Creation; Manufacturing and Industry; Retail, Dining, and Local Businesses; Downtown Revitalization; Transportation and City Infrastructure; Sustainability and Green Spaces; Arts, Culture, and Community Events; Technology Advancements.]

Open-ended text-based responses:

12. What is a top challenge in Salem that you believe the city should prioritize between 2025-2030?
13. What is your biggest challenge right now as a Salem community member?
14. What do you think is missing in Salem, and how would you like to see the community grow or change in the future?
15. What makes Salem UNIQUE as a city and community?
16. Any additional comments or insights you'd like to share?

Confidential Demographic Data

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>17. What is your age?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Under 19○ 20-29○ 30-39○ 40-49○ 50-59○ 60-69○ 70 and over | <p>18. What is your gender?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Female○ Male○ Other○ Prefer Not to Say | <p>19. How would you describe your race and ethnicity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ White○ American Indian or Alaska Native○ Asian or Asian American○ Black or African American○ Hispanic or Latino/a○ Middle Eastern or North African○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander○ Another race or ethnicity (please specify): _____○ Prefer not to say |
|---|---|--|

20. What is the highest level of education you've completed?

- Some high school
- High school diploma or GED
- Some college, no degree
- Trade or vocational training
- Associate degree (e.g., AA, AS)
- Undergraduate degree (e.g., BA, BS)
- Graduate or professional degree (e.g., CPA, MS, MBA, JD, MD, PhD)
- Other (please specify): _____
- Prefer not to say

22. What is your current work status?

- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Small business owner
- Doing gig, freelance, or cash-based work (ie childcare, deliveries, rideshare, etc.)
- Temporarily laid off, furloughed, or on seasonal break
- Unemployed and looking for work
- Unemployed and not looking for work
- Student in highschool, college, or higher education
- Student in adult education (GED, ESL, or Associates equivalent)
- Student in job training (apprenticeship, fellowship, or tech school)
- Retired
- Stay-at-home parent or caregiver
- Unable to work due to illness, disability, or other reasons
- Other (please describe): _____
- Prefer not to say

21. What was your household income for 2024?

- below \$25,000
- \$25,000-49,999
- \$50,000-74,999
- \$75,000- 99,999
- \$100,000-149,999+
- \$150,000-199,999
- \$200,000+
- Other/Prefer not to Say

23. What economic sector do you work in?

- Manufacturing or factory work
- Hospitality or food service (restaurants, hotels, catering)
- Healthcare (hospitals, nursing homes, home health care, etc.)
- Childcare, education, or school staff
- Farming, agriculture, or food processing
- Construction, skilled trades, or maintenance (plumbing, electrical, HVAC, etc.)
- Transportation, delivery, or warehousing (including trucking, rideshare, courier)
- Retail or sales (stores, supermarkets, car sales, etc.)
- Banking, finance, or insurance
- Small business owner or self-employed
- Public service, nonprofit, or religious organization
- Informal, cash-based, or gig work
- Not currently working for any reason
- Other (please describe): _____

APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

Warming up:

1. To start, could you each introduce yourself (for the researcher) –what you do, how long you’ve lived in or been involved in Salem, and how does your work connect to the local community?

Experiences of Salem:

2. How do you usually describe Salem to people who’ve never been here?
3. What’s something that has started or grown in the last five years that excites you?

Priorities & Challenges

4. What is something still missing or not working in Salem that concerns you as we look to the planning for the future?
5. What is a top development priority you believe Salem should focus on in the next 3-5 years?
6. What are some barriers—financial, political, logistical, or others—you foresee that could make it difficult to achieve this goal?

Collaboration

7. What support—existing or hypothetical—could the city or community offer to help this development priority?
8. How do you feel you can contribute to accomplishing this priority alongside the city & SOD?

Quality of Life

9. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you enjoy being a part of the Salem community? “1” being not at all, “10” being you couldn’t imagine living anywhere else and you’re trying to get people you know to live here too.
10. What factors came to mind first when considering your rating?

Reflections

11. Anything we didn’t get to talk about today that feels important to share?

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