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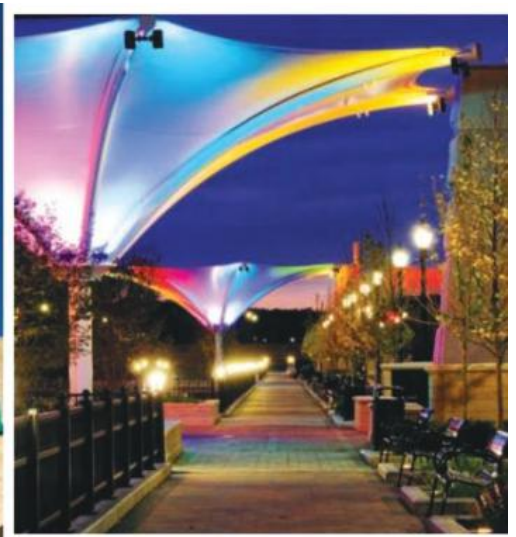
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— ELGIN —

By Lynn Petrak

By embracing growth and change, this historic Fox River city is fusing the past and present

For a town once known for producing fine watches and clocks, there is a definite focus on time in Elgin. The community, located in both west Cook and Kane counties in the far northwest suburbs along the Fox River, honors important periods and moments in its history, yet continually ticks forward to start different traditions and welcome new residents, businesses and visitors.

Arguably, there's no better example of this than the Tower Building in downtown Elgin. The iconic Art Deco-style structure was built as a bank in 1929, just before the Great Depression, and was the site of offices for some sporadic years before being bought by a foundation that sought to maintain and restore it. Capstone Development purchased the 15-story building a couple of years ago and has

turned the space into 44 one-bedroom and two-bedroom luxury apartments that opened in January.

As part of the improvement, the large exterior clock — which includes Art Deco features and stained glass — was fixed and restored, once again working in real time with the community around it.

Mayor David Kaptain says that project is emblematic of Elgin, fusing its past and present in a collaborative way. "It's been a long time coming, and it was quite an undertaking. The building really is now a lighthouse for our city and downtown," he says, noting that the clock restoration was done by experts with help from an Elgin resident.

"I met someone eight or nine years ago who wanted to save the clock and started collecting parts from around

the country, because he knew there would be a time when those parts may not be available," says Kaptain. "When they got ready to restore the clock, they asked him and used some of those parts. It's a local man, and he felt it was important to do it."

Like the city's signature building, there are other ways in which Elgin is continually refreshed while maintaining its legacy and innate charm. First and foremost is the town's diverse and growing population of more than 112,000 residents, and accordingly, the subsequent burgeoning variety of cultural, shopping and dining opportunities. "It's what America is all about, and we want to be a welcoming community," says Kaptain, of Elgin's diversity. "It's really about sharing — we share food, we learn about one another's

culture, and it becomes an integral part of the community and part of what and who we are.”

That sentiment is echoed by Dianha Ortega-Ehreth, an Elginite who was drawn to the area because of its strong schools, rich culture and welcoming attitude, not to mention a charming century-old house that she and her family fell in love with when they found it.

“Elgin is very culture-rich. There are people here from all over the world,” says Ortega-Ehreth, who is president of the Elgin Hispanic Network. “It’s fun filling my calendar with activities and events that lift up the gifts and contributions from different groups of people.”

Elgin’s diversity extends to its geography and range of things to do and see. “In the downtown area, there are different types of entertainment that include the opera, symphonies and plays and different dining options that make us a city in the suburbs,” says Kaptain, who, born and raised in this city, has experienced its evolution firsthand. “Yet we are still part of the rural part of the state, because if you drive a just a few miles outside Elgin, you’re in the country.”

Jennifer Fukala, executive director of the Elgin Downtown Neighborhood Association (DNA), agrees that there is a best-of-both-worlds thing going on in Elgin. “It’s more of an urban suburb, and people love the city feel of it, particularly millennials and young business people looking for a place. And Elgin is growing — if you look at the trends in the state of Illinois, you see that the overall state

population is shrinking, but Elgin is growing. So we have a lot of opportunities here, and it’s a good mix of legacy people who have been invested here for generations with a great vibrancy of new blood.”

Tony Lucenko, director of the Elgin Development Group, says that things are in place for ongoing growth. “Elgin is a very dynamic community. It’s very diverse, and it has strong business sectors,” he says, adding that the city boasts a mix of more than 5,600 businesses, from international corporations to start-up and proverbial mom-and-pop operations.

Time for Entertainment and the Arts

Some western suburbs are known for their dining and shopping, akin to “restaurant rows” and shopping meccas. While there are plenty of places to eat, drink and buy things in the Elgin area, the heart of the city really beats with entertainment and culture.

“There’s art everywhere in Elgin, and it’s very cool,” declares Ortega-Ehreth. If the restored Tower Building is an icon that represents the bridge of past and future in downtown Elgin, the Grand Victoria Riverboat Casino in downtown Elgin is a more recent visual hallmark. Opened in 2005, the casino has scores of table games and slot machines, along with several entertainment venues and four restaurants.

Arts are part of the casino’s offerings, too, including an upcoming performance of the comedy “Dixie’s Tupperware Party” on March 9 and 10 and the Howl

Experience dueling piano show on March 17. An outdoor concert series put on by the Grand Victoria Casino attract crowds during the summer.

The Hemmens Cultural Center is an arts fixture in Elgin, located along the scenic riverwalk. The 1,200-seat theater offers performances by several featured companies, including the Elgin Symphony Orchestra, GreenRoom Improv, Children’s Theatre of Elgin and Elgin Summer Theatre. The venue also hosts the annual Elgin Short Film Festival, usually held in September and featuring short pieces from filmmakers around the country.

Nearby Elgin Community College (EEC) offers a plethora of arts and entertainment programs throughout the year at the school’s Arts Center, including performances by the Elgin Youth Symphony Orchestra, Elgin Master Chorale and Ballet Folklorico Huehucoyotl, a resident ensemble specializing in Mexican folkloric dance and music.

The ECC campus includes two theaters that stage performances by the college’s band, choir and musical theater ensembles as well as other invited performers, which have in the past included stars like Roseanne Cash and John Hiatt. As an added bonus, the ECC offers pre-show dinners, prepared by students in the college’s culinary arts and hospitality program.

Several performing organizations thrive in this western suburb. Elgin Theatre Company, which won a BroadwayWorld Chicago award for the “The Odd Couple” in 2017, will put



Resources

HISTORIC ELGIN
HOUSE TOUR

Photo by Jennifer Fakao

Gail Borden
Public Library

- Total holdings: 531,893
- Items checked out per year: 1,495,649
- Visitors per year: More than 1 million

Attractions

■ **Blizzard Theatre at Elgin Community College**
1700 Spartan Dr., 847 622-0300.
A 662-seat theatre hosting nationally known performers and community events.

■ **Elgin Art Showcase**
164 Division St., 847 931-6019.
Gallery and performance space for local artists and performers.

■ **Festival Park**
132 S. Grove Ave., 847 931-6100.
Entertainment venue and park featuring a splash fountain, bike trail and fishing area.

■ **Grand Victoria Casino**
250 S. Grove Ave., 847 468-7000.
Dockside riverboat casino for gaming, dining and entertainment.

■ **Hemmens Cultural Center**
45 Symphony Way, 847 931-5900. Home to the Elgin Symphony Orchestra and a venue for concerts, theatre, film festivals and other events.

■ **State Street Market Shops**
701 N. State St., 847 695-3066.
10,000 sq. ft. mall with antique and specialty shops.

Events

■ **Art & Soul on the Fox**
Outdoor juried art and artisan fair held each August.

■ **Elgin Fringe Festival**
September celebration of dance, music and theatre.
www.elginfringefestival.com

■ **Elgin Harvest Market**
200 N. Grove Ave., 847 488-1456.
Seasonal and weekly outdoor farmers market on Thursdays from June through October.

■ **Elgin International Festival**
August festival with ethnic cuisine, entertainment and activities. www.elginifest.org

■ **Elgin Ribfest**
Festival Park, 132 S. Grove Ave.
June event with rib vendors, beer, wine and music.
www.elginribfest.com

Museums

■ **Elgin Fire Barn No. 5 Museum**
533 Saint Charles St., 847 697-6242. Prized artifacts from Elgin Fire Department.

■ **Elgin History Museum**
360 Park St., 847 742-4248.
Permanent and changing exhibits housed in an 1856 landmark building.

■ **Elgin Public Museum**
225 Grand Blvd., 847 741-6655.
Natural history and anthropology museum located in Lords Park.

■ **Fox River Trolley Museum**
365 S. La Fox St. 847 697-4676.
Railroad museum with rides and events open June to October.

Recreation

■ **Bowes Creek Country Club**
1250 Bowes Creek Blvd., 847 214-5880. 18-hole public course and driving range, plus cross-country ski trails.

■ **The Centre of Elgin**
100 Symphony Way, 847 531-7000. Recreational facility with basketball and racquetball courts, indoor track, pool and climbing wall.

■ **Elgin Sports Complex**
709 Sports Way, 847 931-6644.
Lighted soccer and softball fields, sand volleyball courts and a BMX track.

■ **Fox River Trail**
630 232-5980. 40-mile trail for biking, hiking, cross-country skiing and jogging.

■ **The Highlands of Elgin**
875 Sports Way, 847 931-5950.
An 18-hole par 72 golf course with indoor golf simulator.

■ **Lords Park**
325 Hiawatha Dr., 847 531-7000.
108 wooded acres with historic pavilion, petting zoo, aquatic center, basketball and tennis courts and baseball fields.

■ **Wing Park Golf Course**
1000 Wing St., 847 931-5952.
A classic nine-hole municipal golf course dating to 1900s.

Education

■ **Elgin Community College**
1700 Spartan Dr., 847 697-1000.
Comprehensive community college on 209-acre campus.

■ **Judson University**
1151 N. State St., 847 628-2500.
Evangelical Christian liberal arts college.

■ **Providence Baptist College**
345 W. River Rd., 847 931-7222.
Independent, fundamental Baptist institution.

on *The Cell Phone* this June. Chamber Music on the Fox is a classical music series that serves Elgin and surrounding areas, with performances at various venues in the city.

Those who appreciate the visual arts can visit galleries and museums in Elgin that spotlight various artists' works. About a decade ago, the City of Elgin founded the Elgin Art Showcase which, as its name suggests, showcases artists from the area in a studio in downtown Elgin. Side Street Studio Arts opened in 2013, as a way to spotlight those in the local arts scene. Artists also create works in a collaborative space at the Elgin Artspace Lofts, which encompasses 50 units of affordable work/residential space for artists and their families. That mixed-use space was the result of a partnership between the Elgin Arts Commission and the City of Elgin.

Time to Learn

Historically, rivers have been focal points of the communities around them and that's true in Elgin, both in the past and present. Just as the Hemmens Center flanks one part of the Fox River, the Gail Borden Public Library is set over another part of the waterway. While the view is beautiful from the inside windows, this library is also known for what's inside, in book and digital form as well as in public programs.

Opened in 2003, the nearly 140,000-sq-ft main library is the third largest library building in the state and has received many accolades for its services and offerings, including the 2009 National Medal for Museum and Library Services.

In addition to its collections, the Borden library offers a host of public programs. Topics run the gamut from fun new hobbies — jewelry making, anyone? — to a screening of a documentary on the Vietnam War to conversational French. There are programs that serve toddlers and small children, Spanish-speaking visitors, tweens, teens, adults and seniors and all kinds of interests, passions and pursuits.

For a community that preserves and promotes its history, Elgin is home to several museums, including the Elgin History Museum, the Elgin Public

Museum and Elgin Fire Barn No. 5 Museum. Each museum offers special exhibits and collections, along with pertinent programs and activities.

Back to the topic of timepieces that put Elgin on the map, the Elgin History Museum offers an Elgin Watch Reserve, providing information on watches and clocks made in the city between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. Another piece of Elgin's manufacturing past is the subject of a special program offered in March on women's compacts — under the Elgin American brand name — that were made in this community in the 1940s.

The Elgin Public Museum is a veritable treasure trove of information and artifacts on the natural history of the area, including fossils from Mazon Creek southwest of what is now Elgin. Those fossils date to the Carboniferous Period.

As its name denotes, the Elgin Fire Barn No. 5 Museum honors firefighting history in the city. The building houses Elgin Fire Department's artifacts including helmets, badges, uniforms, hose carts and early fire trucks. On April 21, the museum will take part in the city's "Open Elgin" event, an open house of 35 public buildings in the city. Open Elgin is an initiative of the Elgin Area Chamber and the Enhancing Elgin committee of the Elgin Development Group.

Time to Party!

Open Elgin is just one of many public events sprinkled through the year. Like many communities, Elgin marks the seasons and holidays with festivities, whether it's a summer running race (the Fox Trot in May), Halloween traditions (Nightmare on Chicago Street in October) or holiday events (Winter Wonderland in early December).

Many other events take place in Elgin, such as the annual Elgin Civil War Experience, held in early June. History and U.S. Civil War buffs gather in town for re-enactments, encampments and activities like a vintage baseball game, a fashion show and a cavalry competition. "It takes place on a property that used to be a state hospital. People from around



the country visit and camp out, complete with horses and cavalries," says Fukala.

She points to other major events, including a fun Cinco de Mayo coming up in May. "We also have a big party for the Fourth of July," she says, adding that the parade and fireworks show is one of the biggest in the area.

Fitting for a town steeped in arts and culture, Elgin draws crowds at the annual Art & Soul on the Fox, a fine arts event held in August in the Riverside Drive Promenade and put together by the City of Elgin and Elgin's Art for All Art League.

Time to Eat, Drink and Shop

Whether they're looking for a pre-show dinner or post-performance drink or just want to savor a unique dining experience, visitors to and residents of Elgin can choose from a variety of eateries that reflect the diversity of the community.

Al's Café & Creamery is distinctive because it's located inside a Victorian-style building. Opened more than 30 years ago, Al's specializes in American cuisine with globally-inspired flavors. Ortega-Ehreth has a suggestion for those who visit this spot: "Swing by Al's restaurant for a chocolate Coke — they're my favorite."

Another longtime eatery popular with locals is Mel's Pizza, which opened in 1974. Walnut Speak Easy was established in

1965 and celebrates the Prohibition era in this country in its theme. The Elgin Public House is a staple, too, offering a wide-ranging menu in addition to special events like a Marvel vs. DC Comics Trivia Night and an upcoming Easter Brunch.

A newer restaurant in town, Alexander's Café, features American-style dishes, including a comfort-food meatloaf and a Friday night fish fry. Dog's Paw Brewing is another newer attraction, with in-house brews and gourmet sandwiches, burgers and hot dogs.

The city's longstanding ties to the Laotian community are evident at the White Pearl Restaurant that serves up authentic Lao sausages and sticky rice, among other dishes. As the population of Hispanic residents has grown in Elgin, so too has the number of authentic Mexican restaurants, such as El Paraiso and Sammy's Mexican Grill, among others. A hidden gem — and one also recommended by Ortega-Ehreth — is the elotes counter at the Elgin Fresh Market that serves up some of the best street corn around.

Flavors from other parts of the world can be sampled at Toom Toom Thai and Café Roma, among other local dining establishments.

Many restaurants and bars in downtown Elgin have character because of the surroundings. "That's one of the

Statistical Snapshot

Population

- 2015 pop est - 112,105
- Increase from 2000: 17%
- Median age: 33
- 19 and under: 31%
- 20-24: 7%
- 25-34: 16%
- 35-44: 14%
- 45-54: 13%
- 55-64: 10%
- 65 and over: 9%
- Male: 50%
- Female: 50%
- White: 66%*
- African-American: 7%*
- Asian: 6%*
- Hispanic: 44%*

Income

- Median household income: \$59,832

ELGIN HISTORY MUSEUM

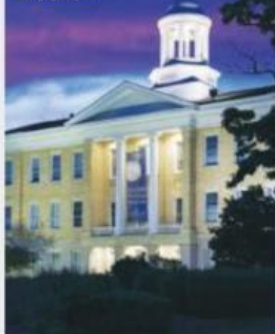


Photo by Tom Lee

Education

- High school degree or higher: 79%
- Bachelor's degree or higher: 24%
- Graduate or professional degree: 8%

Housing

- Total households: 34,755
- Family households: 72%
- Avg. household size: 3.1
- Mean price for detached houses: \$179,400
- Owner-occupied units: 23,610
- Renter-occupied units: 11,145
- Gross median rent: \$971

Business/Employment

- Residents employed: 64%
- Residents unemployed: 6%
- Avg. travel time to work: 29 minutes

* Population percentages are based on self-reporting, where individuals may report more than one ethnicity.
Sources: 2015 U.S. Census, City-Data.com and usa.com

great things about dining in Elgin — the atmosphere of the spaces,” says Fukala, who shares an example. “Martini Room is beautiful and it has the original tin ceiling, like many other buildings here.”

As a large city, Elgin has a variety of stores and shops. Of course, in a town that was once defined by and supported by timepieces, there is a clock business, Elgin Clock Repair that first opened in 1981.

Several stores cater to particular interests and needs. Elgin Knit Works, located in historic buildings, offers unique yarns and knitting classes. Those looking for a celebratory quinceaneras outfit can find it at Dulce's Boutique. Soulful Sparrow is a charming boutique that carries jewelry, gifts, apparel and home décor pieces, including items that have been repurposed or handmade by local artisans.

Time to Explore the Outdoors

While it's often said that Elgin has an urban feel to it, the city is known for its green side, too.

“We have two of the finest city parks in the Fox Valley — Lords Park and Festival Park,” says Mayor Kaptain. “We also have three natural areas that are part of the city and unique to northern Illinois — Bluff Springs, Trout Park and Sleepy Hollow Ravine. They are all open to the

public, and they often have guided tours and open houses.”

To his point, Elgin's nearly 70 parks are a source of pride. Lords Park even includes a farm zoo — which began in 1895 — with pigs, cows, goats, sheep, llama and a miniature donkey. Elgin Public Museum is also on the grounds of Lords Park.

On the southeast side of the city, Bluff Springs nature area spans 100 acres with hiking trails and wetlands. Trout Park is a nature preserve that includes a collection of white cedar trees and a fishing spot popular among locals.

Some of the dozens of parks in Elgin are used to host special events. Festival Park, for instance, lives up to its lively name with several entertainment events a year, including summer concerts. The site also includes a playground and spray park that is a popular spot in warmer months.

The plethora of trails and paths in Elgin, many of which link parks and nature areas, make this area a destination for riders through the area. “The bike path that runs through Festival Park is the epicenter of the Illinois bike system,” says Fukala, adding, “We have a lot of businesses who cater to cyclists.” Among them, she says, is Arabica Café near the bike path.

The 40-mile Fox River Trail that stretches through many western and

northwestern suburbs is another hub in Elgin. The trail is used by local residents as well as visitors, who can ride or drive in or bring their bikes on a Metra train, which stops not far from the trail. Those looking for a nice stroll can also take to the Riverside Drive Promenade along the Fox River.

While you still can, you might want to swing out to Elgin in March to catch a glimpse of bald eagles that nest there in the cold months. “About four years ago, we started seeing bald eagles wintering here, and that population has grown significantly,” says Fukala.

Time to Play

Beyond hiking, running and riding on the network of trails and paths that wind through Elgin, visitors and residents can take part in a number of other outdoor and indoor activities.

There are at least five golf courses in this suburb, including Wing Park Golf Course, Highlands of Elgin, Rolling Knoll Golf Course, Bowes Creek Country Club and Elgin Country Club.

For indoor recreation, the Centre of Elgin lives up to its name. It's located in the center of town, not far from the river and other popular attractions.

Run by Elgin Parks and Recreation, the 185,000-sq-ft facility includes an expansive health and fitness center, a large pool, dance rooms, a climbing wall, a three-court fieldhouse, racquetball courts and an indoor track.

Time for School

Residents and leaders emphasize the quality and scope of education in this suburb. “I think the best way that Elgin is preparing for the future is by investing in its leadership in education,” says Ortega-Ehreth, noting that Elgin has the second largest school district in Illinois.

Elgin is home to the aforementioned Elgin Community College and Judson University, a private liberal arts college. Elgin Academy, is the oldest, non-sectarian (i.e., run by religious sects) college preparatory school in the Midwest. ■