

Martin Internal Policy Memo

City of Martin, Tennessee | Pre-Framework Strategic Brief | 2026

Martin's Next Decade: A Coherent Strategic Framework for Sustained, Identity-Preserving Growth

What This Document Is

The Voices, Vision, and Viability framework adopted by the City of Martin on February 12, 2026 is a public-facing governance document. What you are reading now is the foundational policy brief that will give that framework its direction, its priorities, and its honest fiscal grounding. It is written for the people who have actual leverage in Martin: those who own assets, have deployed capital, carried institutional relationships, and bear a stake in the city's long-term trajectory that goes beyond elected tenure or committee membership.

This brief presents a comprehensive strategic framework covering the fiscal reality, the community evidence, the five directions Martin needs to pursue, a sequenced ten-year roadmap, and the governance structure capable of executing it. Among the structural proposals in this brief is the creation of a new private stakeholder body, the Martin Civic Capital Council (MC³), which is addressed in Section VII alongside the broader governance question. MC³ is one important proposal within a larger framework. The framework stands on its own.

One principle holds throughout: **Martin's goal is not to replicate other university towns. It is to become a better version of itself.** Every recommendation is calibrated to that principle.

I. The Moment Martin Is In

Martin did not arrive at this strategic moment by design. Three realities are operating simultaneously, and none of them will wait.

FISCAL PRESSURE	STRUCTURAL OPPORTUNITY	CIVIC MANDATE
\$658K general fund balance against a \$2.72M state target by 2030. Total loan obligations of \$23.17M. Annual debt service of \$2.30M. Salaries and benefits consuming 59% of expenditures. An operating margin of \$68,236 on \$15.79M in revenue.	The VVV framework passed 4-2 on February 12, 2026. An advisory committee is seated. A city manager search is active. A governance structure is in transition for the first time in a generation.	1,197 residents on record with clear priorities. Public trust damaged by the indictment and its aftermath, but not destroyed. A neutral majority (48.1%) watching to see whether something different actually happens.

These three realities are not in opposition. The fiscal pressure forces the discipline Martin's governance has historically avoided. The structural opportunity provides the vehicle for doing things differently. The civic mandate provides the legitimacy. The task before the people receiving this document is to ensure

all three are held together long enough to produce a durable plan, rather than another cycle of activity that does not compound into change.

II. What 1,197 Voices Actually Said

The community needs assessment is the evidentiary foundation for every strategic decision that follows. It should be read as a portrait of a community that knows itself well and is giving its leaders a specific and actionable brief.

The Identity Finding

52.1% of respondents named small-town atmosphere as what they enjoy most about Martin. The most common words used to describe the city were home (39 mentions), small town (38), community (17), and friendly (14). No respondents gave quality of life the highest possible rating, yet 38.7% expressed positive sentiment about Martin as a place. This is not a contradiction. It is a coherent community position: we love what this place is, and we are frustrated by what it is not yet delivering. Residents are not asking Martin to become something else. They are asking for competent delivery of what a city of this character should already be providing.

The Five Findings, Read as Strategic Direction

FINDING	STRATEGIC IMPLICATION
Infrastructure & Broadband (Internet: 2.35/5)	Foundational service failure, not a luxury complaint. Largely externally fundable. Must be treated as infrastructure on the same level as water and roads. No serious business relocation decision in 2026 gets made without a broadband answer.
University-Community Integration (71.7% feel disconnected)	The lowest-cost, highest-leverage move available to Martin. An estimated 35% of city jobs are university-dependent. A city and an institution this intertwined that function this separately is a structural inefficiency the strategic plan must directly address.
Economic Development & Jobs (Jobs rated 3.10/5; growth: -0.03%)	Stagnation rather than crisis, but stagnation compounds. The path forward is not recruiting outside employers to a city with a \$68K operating margin. It is building conditions under which Martin's existing workforce accesses career-level employment without leaving Weakley County.
Downtown & Retail Leakage (15.1% clothing purchased locally)	84.9% of residents shop for clothing outside Martin. Every dollar spent in Union City or Jackson removes sales tax revenue from the general fund. Downtown investment is a fiscal strategy, not an aesthetic one.
Communication & Civic Trust (City communication: 2.4/5)	Trust is not rebuilt through better graphics or a new website. It is rebuilt through consistent, visible follow-through over time. The credibility of any strategic plan with Martin's residents will depend on being associated with things that actually get done.

III. The Fiscal Reality, Named Precisely

Effective strategic planning requires honest fiscal arithmetic. The City of Martin's FY 2025-2026 general fund budget tells a clear story that every recommendation in this brief is built around.

BUDGET ITEM	FIGURE	STRATEGIC NOTE
Total General Fund Revenue	\$15,790,293	FY 2025-2026
Total Expenditures	\$15,722,057	Operating margin: \$68,236
Total Loan Obligations	\$23,170,154	Debt load relative to a \$15.8M revenue base is the single most constraining fiscal fact in this brief.
Annual Debt Service (P+I)	\$2,298,080	14.6% of total expenditures. Fixed in the short term. Every investment proposal must account for this first.
Salaries + Benefits	\$9,274,210	59% of total expenditures. Structurally fixed. Personnel decisions carry outsized long-term fiscal weight.
Current Fund Balance	\$658,326	
Comptroller Target by 2030	\$2,717,551	Gap to close: approximately \$2.06M in four years.

TOP REVENUE SOURCES	TOP EXPENDITURE CATEGORIES
Property Tax: \$4,837,612	Fire Department: \$2,917,253
Local Sales Tax: \$3,800,000	Employee Benefits: \$2,864,525
Grants & Contributions: \$1,432,069	Police Department: \$2,421,232
State Sales Tax: \$1,376,625	Debt Service (P+I): \$2,298,080
EMS Charges: \$1,200,000	Capital Outlay: \$1,482,694
Fines & Forfeitures: \$420,300	City Hall Administration: \$1,011,442
Business Tax & License: \$350,000	Recreation Department: \$739,792
Beer Tax: \$322,500	Community Development: \$433,861

What the Budget Tells This Group

The \$68,236 operating margin is not a crisis. It is a signal. Martin is running close to the edge of what its current revenue base can sustain while carrying \$23.17M in loan obligations and needing to build a fund balance from \$658K to \$2.72M in four years. The non-general funds offer more stability: Water and Sewer carries a \$15.13M fund balance, Natural Gas \$2.89M, and Solid Waste \$1.26M. The strategic directions recommended in this brief were selected with the general fund constraint in mind. None require capital expenditure the city does not have. Each is calibrated to either generate revenue, attract external funding, or cost primarily leadership attention rather than budget lines.

IV. The Central Strategic Question

How does Martin grow without losing the reason people stay?

This is the question every other question in this brief is trying to answer.

The executive analysis produced alongside the community assessment identifies a fork in the road: one path pursues rapid growth through aggressive university-city integration and economic development at scale. The other focuses on preserving Martin's small-town character while improving service delivery quality. This brief takes the position that the fork is a false choice, but only if the strategic framework is designed correctly.

Murray, Kentucky is a more instructive model than Bowling Green for Martin's purposes. Murray grew its economic base deliberately, maintained its character through zoning and cultural investment, and made explicit decisions about what it would not become. The question for Martin is not growth versus preservation. It is sequenced, identity-anchored growth versus reactive development that trades character for scale at the first sign of pressure.

The recommended path is what this brief calls Sustained Character Growth: investment in the infrastructure and services a small university city should be able to deliver, activated by strategic UTM partnership, disciplined by fiscal constraint, and protected by an explicit community identity commitment that shapes every significant development decision going forward.

V. The Identity Commitment

Before strategic directions, sequencing, or funding mechanisms, a statement of what Martin is trying to preserve and why it must be made explicit before everything else. Identity preservation in a growing community is not passive. It happens through specific, affirmative decisions about what kind of development is welcome, what scale is appropriate in which parts of the city, and what community character markers are non-negotiable.

What Martin's Identity Consists Of

- Safety and low crime as a daily lived experience. Public safety is the highest-rated city service at 4.08/5 and the single largest expenditure category at \$2.92M annually. 35.3% named safety as a top reason to live here. Any strategy that creates fiscal pressure on public safety will be felt before anything else.
- Proximity and rootedness. 44% of respondents have lived here more than 20 years. This is a community of people who chose to stay. The strategy must give the next generation a reason to make the same choice.
- Human scale. Residents consistently describe Martin using words that imply knowability: a city where institutions are accessible, where growth does not require anonymity, where the fabric of daily community life remains intact.
- Coexistence with UTM. The university as backdrop and partner, not as the organizing force around which everything else is arranged. Martin is a city that happens to have a major university. It is not a university town that happens to have a city government.

What the Identity Commitment Requires in Practice

DECISION AREA

IDENTITY-ANCHORED STANDARD

New development	Scale, density, and design standards that make Martin neighborhoods recognizable as Martin. Not generic commercial corridors that could belong to any city in any state.
Downtown investment	Invest downtown for Martin residents first. Restaurants, retail, and gathering spaces that serve the people who already live here, not an external tourism or real estate appreciation strategy.
UTM integration	UTM as functional partner: interns in city offices, faculty in planning processes, purchasing power directed locally, local hiring pipelines. Not the city reorganizing itself around campus expansion or student market priorities.
Economic development	Prioritize employers that hire from Martin's existing workforce at wages that allow residents to stay. Residents ranked manufacturing and industrial at 21.8% in desired business types. Technology companies at 10.4%. They know what kind of jobs their community needs.
Civic communication	The relationship between city government and residents must be ongoing, not transactional. Consistent follow-through over time is the only thing that actually moves the 2.4/5 communication rating.

VI. Five Strategic Directions

The five findings from the community assessment are not problems to be solved through discrete projects. They are systems that need to change. Each direction below is framed as a system change because project thinking produces one-time outputs, and Martin needs compounding returns.

1. Broadband as Baseline Infrastructure

The 2.35/5 connectivity rating is a governance and investment problem, not a technology problem. Available mechanisms include BEAD program allocations through TN Broadband and partnership with UTM's institutional infrastructure. The target is connectivity comparable to any city in the region, sufficient that it is never again cited as a barrier to business location, remote work, or economic participation. This is largely externally fundable and should not draw from a general fund operating on a \$68K margin.

2. UTM as Functional City Partner

The 71.7% disconnection figure is the most actionable finding in the entire assessment because closing that gap costs almost nothing in budget terms. UTM has students who need experiential learning. Martin has city departments that need capacity. UTM has faculty who research community development. Martin has a strategic planning process that needs expert input. A signed Memorandum of Understanding committing both sides to integration as a strategic priority is the starting instrument. The model used by Murray State University and the City of Murray is the nearest applicable template.

3. Workforce Pipelines That Begin Before Graduation

The economic development priority named by 38.8% of residents is not best served by recruiting outside employers to a city with a \$68K operating margin and no significant incentive pool. It is best served by creating conditions under which Martin residents access career-level employment without leaving Weakley County. K-12 pathways in partnership with Weakley County Schools, UTM program-to-local-

employer pipelines in healthcare, manufacturing, and technical fields, and a local hiring preference standard for any business receiving city incentives are the operational levers.

4. Downtown as a Revenue Strategy

Residents who drive to Union City or Jackson for clothing (84.9%) and dining are removing sales tax revenue from the general fund. Every sit-down restaurant or retail establishment that opens downtown is a sales tax event, not merely an amenity. The local sales tax line in the current budget is \$3.8M. Recovering even a fraction of the retail and dining leakage moves that figure in a direction that matters to the Comptroller. Downtown investment should be evaluated by projected revenue return to the general fund, not by aesthetic appeal or ribbon-cutting optics.

5. Civic Communication as Infrastructure

Communication satisfaction averaging 2.4/5 is a trust problem. Trust is rebuilt through consistency, transparency, and follow-through, not through better graphics. A standing monthly update from city administration, a defined public accountability mechanism through the VVV committee, and a governance standard that makes resident feedback a continuous process rather than an event are the operational requirements.

VII. Governance and Structural Proposals

No strategic framework survives poor governance. The community assessment, the fiscal data, and the events that led to the Comptroller's oversight all point to the same conclusion: Martin's governance structure needs deliberate strengthening. This section addresses two distinct governance proposals: the structure of city executive leadership, and the creation of the Martin Civic Capital Council.

Proposal One: City Executive Leadership Structure

The question of how Martin's executive leadership should be structured is a legitimate governance decision this community has the standing and obligation to make deliberately. Two models are worth serious consideration, and each carries meaningful regional precedent.

STRONG MAYOR MODEL	PROFESSIONAL CITY MANAGER MODEL
Elected leadership retains executive authority. A full-time, empowered mayor serves as the city's chief executive, accountable directly to voters. This model works well when the elected leader has the administrative capacity, the policy expertise, and the long-term institutional knowledge to run a city with complex fiscal obligations.	A professional city manager with extensive governance experience is hired by and accountable to the city council and mayor. Elected leadership sets policy direction; the city manager handles administration, operations, and implementation. This model has produced measurable results at comparable scale in Paris, TN and across the region.
The case for it: direct democratic accountability; a single visible leader for community trust-building; works when the right person holds the office.	The case for it: removes administrative capacity from the electoral cycle; brings professional expertise to a \$15.8M operating environment with \$23M in debt obligations; insulates day-to-day governance from political disruption.
The risk: Martin's recent history demonstrates what happens when this model is filled by the wrong person. The indictments, the Comptroller oversight, and the current fiscal position are in part products of a governance structure without adequate checks.	The risk: creates distance between residents and executive decision-making; requires a high-quality hire in a competitive market; only as good as the person and the council's willingness to hold them accountable.

This brief does not prescribe one model over the other. What it argues is that the decision must be made explicitly, with full awareness of the tradeoffs, and that whichever model is adopted must include structural accountability mechanisms that have been absent from Martin's governance. Both models require: a clearly defined relationship between the city's executive function and the VVV advisory committee; a governance standard that treats the Comptroller's fund balance requirement as a non-negotiable floor; and standing mechanisms for private-sector stakeholders to interface with city leadership on strategic decisions.

Proposal Two: The Martin Civic Capital Council (MC³)

The second structural proposal is the creation of a new body that does not currently exist in Martin's governance landscape: a formally constituted private stakeholder council made up of Martin's most consequential investors, property owners, and institutional actors.

Martin's strategic challenge is not a lack of plans. It is a lack of the right people in the right structural relationship to the city's decision-making. Plans produced by government alone reflect the priorities and limitations of government alone. The people receiving this document represent something the city does not have institutionalized: serious private-sector judgment, deployed capital, long-term ownership stake, and the kind of accountability that comes not from an election cycle but from having real money and real assets tied to the city's future. MC³ is the proposal to formalize that relationship.

Structure and Design

ELEMENT	DESIGN PRINCIPLE
Name	Martin Civic Capital Council — MC ³ . Martin is place-specific. Civic signals purpose beyond individual financial interest. Capital names the defining characteristic: members have deployed real capital in Martin and bear consequences that outlast any elected term. The cube signals three simultaneous dimensions: civic accountability, private investment, and long-term institutional commitment.
Size	Approximately 12 to 15 members. Small enough to make decisions. Large enough to cover Martin's key ownership and investment categories.
Membership criteria	Active investment in Martin: property ownership, business operation, or institutional deployment of capital. Not honorific membership. Real stake in the outcome.
Relationship to city government	Formal MOU with the city establishing MC ³ 's standing to interface with city leadership, receive budget and fiscal data, review major development proposals, and provide written recommendation on strategic plan alignment.
Relationship to VVV committee	Coordinated but distinct. The VVV committee is the public-facing governance body. MC ³ is the private-sector counterpart. They share strategic direction but operate through different mechanisms.
Meeting cadence	Quarterly minimum. Convened by MC ³ 's own chair, not by city government. Agenda shaped by the council's own priorities.

Accountability

Annual public statement of MC³'s commitments and what was delivered. A standard the council sets for itself, not a report card imposed from outside.

Term structure

Three-year rotating terms with staggered entry. No permanent members. The council evolves as Martin's stakeholder landscape does.

What MC³ Does, Concretely

- Holds city leadership accountable to the strategic plan through direct, private engagement before issues become public crises. MC³ members have standing to request a direct briefing from the mayor or city manager on any major fiscal or development decision.
- Deploys private capital in alignment with the strategic plan. Downtown investment, workforce pipeline funding, broadband match requirements, and UTM partnership infrastructure are areas where private capital can move faster and more flexibly than government appropriations.
- Connects Martin to external funding mechanisms that require private-sector partners. Federal and state grant programs in economic development, broadband, and workforce development frequently require demonstrated private match or employer commitment. MC³ provides that.
- Provides a standing interface for major investors and employers considering Martin. When a business is evaluating a location decision, MC³ is the group that makes the first serious call.
- Protects the strategic plan across election cycles. Elected leadership changes. MC³'s institutional memory does not change on the same timeline.
- Serves as connective tissue between the public VVV framework and the private-sector commitments that make it executable. The VVV plan will say what needs to happen. MC³ is a significant part of how it does.

A Note on Legitimacy

MC³ will only function if it is perceived as acting in the community's interest, not only in the interests of its members. That perception is built through two things: transparency about what the council is and what it does, and a visible track record of commitments producing tangible results for residents who are not members. The council's legitimacy with Martin's neutral majority depends on that track record. Its legitimacy with elected leadership depends on it being a resource and a partner, not a pressure group or a shadow government. Both distinctions require deliberate attention from the founding members.

VIII. A Sequenced Roadmap

Sequencing is the difference between a plan that builds momentum and one that collapses under its own ambition. The following three-phase roadmap is calibrated to Martin's fiscal reality, the VVV framework timeline, and the trust-building that must precede structural investment.

PHASE	STRATEGIC FOCUS
Years 1-2 (2026-2028) Foundation	General fund stabilization toward the \$2.72M Comptroller target. City executive governance structure decided and implemented. UTM partnership MOU signed. MC ³ formally constituted with founding membership and MOU with the city. Standing civic communication

	infrastructure launched. Ward-level listening sessions completed. Comprehensive grant mapping for all five strategic directions. Quick-win UTM pilots: student interns in city offices, faculty in planning. Downtown revenue diagnostic completed.
Years 3-5 (2028-2031) Capacity	Broadband expansion phase one , funded through external mechanisms identified in Years 1-2. Workforce pipeline launched with Weakley County Schools and UTM. Downtown investment phase one anchored in revenue-generating priorities from the diagnostic. Communication trust producing measurable improvement in resident satisfaction metrics. First five-year VVV review with updated baseline data. MC ³ in its second membership cycle.
Years 6-10 (2031-2036) Transformation	Measurable movement on all 2024 baselines: internet above 3.5, UTM-community disconnect reversed, jobs above 3.75, communication trust above 3.5. Population growth rate positive. Downtown generating meaningful sales tax contribution above the 2024 baseline. Fund balance at or above the Comptroller target. Second-generation community input commissioned to revise the plan for the decade that follows.

IX. The Tensions This Framework Does Not Resolve

A document that pretends to resolve every tension is not an honest strategic brief. The following tensions are real, and the people receiving this document will have to navigate them. Naming them is not a failure of the framework. It is the framework being honest.

- Urgency versus patience. Residents want visible change quickly. Structural change takes years. The risk is that the plan loses the neutral majority before it produces anything they can see. The mitigation is quick wins in Years 1-2 that signal credibility without committing resources that do not yet exist.
- Debt discipline versus investment capacity. The \$2.30M annual debt service is fixed. The \$2.06M fund balance gap must close by 2030. Any proposed investment that does not account for both facts before advancing will not survive contact with the actual budget.
- The loud voices versus the silent majority. The 48.1% neutral population is underrepresented in every public forum. Reaching them requires more than good intentions from either the VVV committee or MC³.
- Long-term vision versus the election cycle. The November 2026 election will produce new leadership that inherits this plan. Making it durable across that transition requires it to be owned by the community, not by any single officeholder.
- Identity versus market logic. Developers follow density and purchasing power, not community character commitments. If Martin wants to shape how growth happens, it needs zoning, design standards, and incentive structures that make the desired pattern more attractive than the default one.

X. What Success Looks Like in 2036

If this framework is executed with discipline, the following changes should be measurable by 2036. Each maps to a specific 2024 baseline. These are not aspirational slogans. They are the targets against which the VVV committee, MC³, and city leadership should hold themselves accountable.

Broadband: Internet connectivity rating moves from 2.35/5 to above 3.5/5. No resident or business cites connectivity as a barrier to economic participation or location decisions.

UTM Integration: The 71.7% who felt disconnected from UTM in 2024 is now a minority position. UTM is described by residents as a genuine partner in city life.

Jobs and Economy: The jobs rating moves from 3.10/5 to above 3.75/5. Martin's negative growth rate becomes positive. A meaningful share of UTM graduates have a local career pathway they are actively choosing over departure.

Downtown and Revenue: Retail and dining leakage reduced by at least 25% from the 2024 baseline. Local sales tax contribution to the general fund measurably higher. Downtown is where Martin residents actually go.

Civic Trust: Communication satisfaction moves from 2.4/5 to above 3.5/5. The neutral 48.1% has become an engaged majority. City government is described as responsive, not as something to be endured.

Fiscal Health: General fund balance at or above the \$2.72M Comptroller requirement. Debt service-to-revenue ratio declining. Capital investment decisions made from a position of stability rather than constraint.

Identity: Martin is recognizably Martin. It has grown and improved. It has not become a town like everywhere else. Residents still reach for the word home when asked to describe where they live.

XI. A Closing Note

This brief was written for a select group because the work of translating a community needs assessment, a city budget, and a decade of accumulated civic frustration into a coherent strategic framework is not primarily a public communication task. It is a decision-making task, and decisions of this consequence require people who understand the full picture, including the parts that are uncomfortable.

1,197 residents sat down and told this city what they think, what they want, and what they are worried about. The fiscal data says what the operating constraints are. The VVV framework provides the public vehicle. The five strategic directions provide the content. The governance proposals in Section VII — including MC³ — provide the structure.

What makes any of it work is not the quality of the document. It is whether the people in this room treat the plan as a discipline rather than a deliverable, and stay in it long enough to protect what they helped build.

The survey gave us the what. The committee will give us the how. The community has to live the plan.

