

Council Work Session
November 2, 2022

The Fergus Falls City Council held a work session on November 2, 2022, at 8:00 am in the City Council Chambers. Mayor Schierer called the meeting to order, and the following council members were in attendance: Hagberg, Kvamme, Thompson, Gustafson and Hicks. Fish, Rufer and Arneson were absent.

Bart Fischer of WSB provided an update on the city's Strategic Planning process and outlined the topics and strategies that have been provided. After the initial meeting held earlier this year with the council and department heads, four groups were identified and later combined into two groups. Each group has held two in person meetings and one online meeting. The groups are identifying community goals and priorities and this information will be distilled into short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. "Champions" of these projects will be identified later in the process as well.

Community and Social Development/Infrastructure Committee

Communications

- City creates a monthly or weekly "popular report" or standing city update to proactively provide accurate information to residents across the most effective and efficient communication platforms.
- City conducts monthly updates, provides information on topics of interest and proactively provides accurate information on Facebook Live or similar platforms.
- City is actively engaged in and providing proactive, accurate information on the Daily Journal's "Neighborhood" site.
- Explore and establish with community partners a shared calendar site such as the Daily Journal's shared calendar site.
- Creation of landing pages on all city and community partner websites.
- City defines a brand for the community and uses it on all messaging.

The council discussed the limitations of PEG Access for all residents and the poor sound quality of the meetings. There may also be confusion amongst residents between PEG Access and YouTube. Gustafson suggested a bi-weekly update after the Committee of the Whole meeting so residents understand the action the council will be taking at their upcoming meeting. There were also questions if the Daily Journal's platforms are the best to use and suggestions were made to incorporate the calendars from the City, Chamber, Downtown Council and other partners.

Infrastructure Improvements and Creating a Culture of Pride in Community

- Create and enhance an accurate, consistent, and funded 10-year CIP. Recognize the 5-year CIP is detailed and defined, 5-10-year CIP has more placeholders for priority programming.
- Explore and adopt franchise fees as a stable, dedicated funding source for roads. Communicate to the public the costs of roads, how they will be paid for and the legal restrictions of funding such as special assessments.
- Use the accurate CIP to create an outward facing interactive, public GIS page on the website where the public can point and click to gather numerous pieces of information regarding infrastructure projects and plans. Map out each year of the GIS with cost estimates and

funding sources. Additionally highlight infrastructure needs on the website so the community understands all facets of decision making and prioritization associated with infrastructure projects. Boil down the data/metrics for public understanding and consumption.

- Track main breaks
 - Track problem areas
 - Track maintenance and replacement schedules
 - Create a consistent system of metrics to base maintenance and replacement schedules on
 - Provide information on the various funding mechanisms and how they factor into the maintenance and replacement of infrastructure. Example: State aid funded streets may be replaced sooner than local streets because there is a state aid funding source to replace those roads.
- Develop a strategy to communicate and educate the public on the above.
 - Create an asset management program and metrics for maintenance and replacement of internal infrastructure and capital equipment. Adopt a policy for replacement using both replacement norms and metrics.

The Engineering, Finance and Community Development departments are largely responsible for the CIP plan being developed and it has been a struggle to find the necessary time and resources to dedicate to this plan. There is a need to balance out the needs and wants of the community and the public sentiment changes every two years with an election. Staff understand the public's desire for a more forward-facing interactive platform the community can access, but no funding source has been identified for this software. There was a discussion about the cost involved in defining the scope of underground work to be completed in conjunction with street projects.

Creation of Destination Places

- Continued focus on riverfront improvements and connections
- Create a trail connection to the dairy property, connection to the brewery and other points of attention
- Create a plan, CIP, strategy for park amenity updates and improvements. Explore various revenue streams. Public/private partnerships are great; however they cannot be relied on.
- Encourage/create an activity/equipment rental facility near the river (bikes, kayaks, tubes). Most likely a private enterprise which may use public land to increase recreational aspects of the river.
- Explore opportunities for community kids ages 9-14 that may not be involved in sports. What activities would provide interest and is there a partnership opportunity with the schools or county.

There was discussion about the need to move the sewer pipes and modify the dams to make the river more available for recreational opportunities and the extensive funding that would be needed.

Overall Community Health

- Support and enhance the Fire and Police Department's efforts around mental health awareness. Communicate those strategies to the public.
- Communicate and educate the public on the mental health resources in the community

- Acknowledge the HRA supportive housing project. Investigate additional opportunities for provision of housing and services to increase overall well-being of existing residents.
- Recognize many in need have multiple issues to be addressed and that the solutions are complex and varied. But steps to providing help and community awareness is important even if it doesn't address all issues.
- Recognize and promote amenities within Fergus Falls that support overall health such as parks, trails, the river etc. and these opportunities should not be discounted.

The Police and Fire Department have been developing resources for mental health needs in the community separately and in conjunction with efforts from the County and Lake Region Healthcare. The city cannot resolve the resource/facility problem alone.

Schools

- Continue to support and work with the local high school regarding internships for local businesses and project-based learning opportunities.
- Find other opportunities to connect with kids in the community
- Engage the local college students in the community
 - Community organizations take part in the college's "Welcome Week"
 - Have college student specific events at the Downtown Pavilion
 - Engage and connect the Downtown Riverfront Council with the college/students
 - Create a bike share location on campus

Students from Hillcrest have an acclimation program to the community, so this group's discussion focused on college students.

Solutions to Childcare Challenge

- Support the existing childcare taskforce efforts
 - Conduct an event to educate providers or interested providers on the resources and support available to them
- Compile data around childcare opportunities in the community such as: What is the need/waiting list? Is there a way to work with employers to provide childcare services? Is there an opportunity to partner with the School District on childcare services?
- Repurpose the "old" school sites into childcare facilities

Economic Development and Land Use Committee

Downtown

- Create a downtown historic district which could include design standards, public/private partnerships and could include access to incentives and funding sources. Educate businesses and property owners regarding the benefits of the designation and explain any potential drawbacks
- Conduct a parking study to assess need in downtown as well as a maintenance and replacement schedule for publicly owned lots. Is there an opportunity for shared parking agreements and shared maintenance costs.

- Create wayfinding in downtown especially to parking and commercial establishments not located on the main downtown roads. Example: parking and location awareness for businesses on side streets.
- Incorporate pedestrian safety into all future projects in downtown, specifically at the Lincoln/Union intersection. Evaluate the timing of stoplights and pedestrian crossings so they do not serve as a disincentive to walking or biking downtown.
- Conduct a commercial leakage study to determine what retail and service activities are absent from the community and why/what residents are leaving the community to find.
- Undertake a market study to use for future site selection for specific businesses within the community
 - How many businesses within a drive time of residential density, income and age?
 - What businesses can be sustainable with the existing demographics?
 - Does the community need more residential development to provide economic viability for desired commercial/service businesses?
- The river is an amenity that will bring people downtown if leveraged properly
 - Continued focus on riverfront improvements and connections
 - Conduct river walk improvements
 - Make river dam modifications to allow for better paddling and tubing on the river
 - Optimize opportunities on public land to encourage more activity in the area
 - Encourage entrepreneurship in the downtown and along the river; try differing ideas to see what is in demand
- Partner with the Chamber on a business highlight campaign to focus on individual downtown businesses. Make this a part of the communications strategy coming from the Community & Social Development/Infrastructure Committee.

Economic Development Tools

- Work with the City Council, Chamber and other strategic stakeholders on an update to the business subsidy plan
 - Define when, how, how much, which sites and for what uses will the city consider business subsidies
- Support micro enterprise funding

There was some discussion that a microgrant may not be enough help to start a business and banks may be a better option. Various entrepreneur spaces are available in the community.

Future Development Strategies

- Market study
- Leakage study
- Housing study
 - The consensus was to focus efforts on housing and residential development in the immediate future as the need for commercial and retail development would follow if residential development expanded.
 - The city wants more residential, especially single family detached housing
 - Utilitize the housing study as a marketing tool to attract developers
 - Goal of 50 units per year in the next 5 years
- Specific Opportunities:

Norgren Property (short-term)

Dairy property (short-term)

Redevelopment of old school sites (mid-term)

Former WWTP site (long-term)

Former Kmart site (long-term)

RTC/Kirkbride (long-term)

- Focus on the existing master plan
- Partner with a developer who can assist in implementing the vision for the site based off the master plan
- Break down the vision into smaller phases and steps

While 50 new housing units per year is likely unrealistic, the bigger issue is getting infrastructure to the vacant sites to make them more attractive for development. The Norgren property has 32 platted sites, but no infrastructure. There have been talks with the School District about this site with the hopes that housing would develop around the school, but they prefer a more central location.

Strategic Infrastructure Investment

- Maintain an accurate CIP that aligns with development goals. This can be done in coordination with the recommended strategies of the Community & Social Development/Infrastructure Committee.

Update the Zoning Code

- Prioritize needed areas of improvement or clarity
- Have a zoning code update completed by Dec 31, 2023

The council agreed the strategic planning is on the right track and during the next round of meetings, the committee members will be asked to start prioritizing projects into long, mid and short-range plans. The council wanted realistic expectations and timeframes developed only for projects with a chance of coming to fruition. The council discussed the importance of focusing on the city's core services including fire, police and streets. Kvamme advocated that projects should still be on the long-term CIP in the event funding becomes available.

The meeting adjourned at 9:11 am

Lynne Olson