



Kandiyohi County & City of Willmar
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

STRATEGIC PLANNING



2022

Appendices:

- A – 2021 EDC Accomplishments
- B – 2021 Strategic Planning Goals Update
- C – 2022 Business Support Survey Summary
- D – Planning Session Presentation
- E – EDC Strategic Goals/Objectives 2022-2023



Kandiyohi County & City of Willmar Economic Development Commission

2022 Strategic Planning Session Summary April 7, 2022 Willmar Conference Center

Background

The mission of the **Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission (EDC)** is to be a catalyst for economic growth of the greater Kandiyohi County Area. The EDC develops organizational priorities on an annual basis by engaging staff, board members, committee chairs and other key stakeholders in fact-finding efforts to identify trends, challenges, and opportunities. The EDC holds an annual strategic planning retreat to prioritize short- and long-term goals with strategic objectives.

Process

The EDC engaged a third-party consultant, Cheryl K. Glaeser with Achieve TFC, to design a process and facilitate a strategic planning retreat with the outcome of developing a shared vision of success and key strategies that will guide the work of the EDC throughout 2022-2023, recognizing the past goal areas and considering the changing needs of the EDC service area.

Discussions gathering insights from EDC staff were used to determine the focus for the Strategic Planning Retreat on April 7, 2022. Insights also guided the materials to be made available to planning participants prior to and during the session. Participants received the following documents (*attached as Appendices A, B and C*): 2021 EDC Accomplishments, 2021 Strategic Planning Goals Update and 2022 Business Support Survey Summary.

Strategic Planning Retreat

EDC staff, Joint Powers and Operations Board members, committee members from the Agriculture and Renewable Energy Development, Broadband and Advanced Technology, Business Retention & Expansion/Recruitment, Finance and Marketing and Public Relations Committees, and other key stakeholders met on April 7, 2022 for a full-day retreat. The presentation used to guide retreat discussions can be found in *Appendix D*.

FRAMING THE DAY

The group began by participating in an exercise to reveal the importance of having diverse perspectives and strengths when working together collaboratively. After reviewing the EDC's existing Mission and Vision, participants reviewed the work to take place throughout the day.

MISSION: To be a catalyst for economic growth of the greater Kandiyohi County Area.

VISION: To provide visionary economic development leadership creating growth, prosperity, innovation, international competitiveness, and enhanced quality of life.

Planning Retreat Expected Outcomes

- *Share insights and explore what we have learned in the past year*
- *Discuss what is working well and what we can improve as we work to be a catalyst for economic growth*
- *Define goals and specific objectives that will make the most difference for the future of Kandiyohi County people and businesses*
- *Strengthen the ways in which we can work together to create and support prosperity, innovation, international competitiveness, and enhanced quality of life*

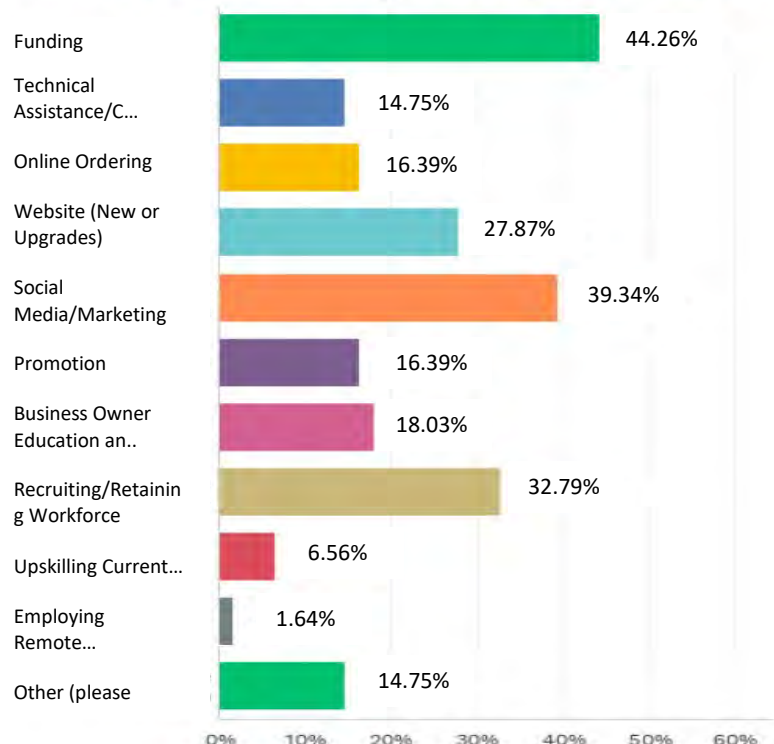
Insights to Guide the Future

Business Insights

Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager with the EDC shared business insights collected through the Business Support Survey sent to businesses (*see Appendix C*). As of April 2022, there were 70 survey respondents. Over half of the respondents indicated that they know how to access EDC resources. When asked about their business operations since March of 2020, 95.7% are still in operation in Kandiyohi County and over half have changed their business operations in response to current realities. Of the business support most needed, **Funding** ranked # 1 (44.26% of respondents). Following closely behind were **Social Media/Marketing** (39.34%), and **Recruiting/Retaining Workforce** (32.79%)

Planning participants heard from business representatives/owners, Hteh Hteh Hta Rue of Chaw’s Asian Market and Ryan Vatnsdal of Erickson Plumbing, Heating & A/C. Both shared the importance of the EDC’s support and funding in helping their businesses. Ryan Vatnsdal shared the challenge of attracting/retaining workers, indicating they will train their own workers but could benefit from having a plumbing/heating program at Ridgewater College. Dr. Craig Johnson, Ridgewater College President, shared interest in offering a program as well as the difficulty in attracting educators to teach classes in this field. Hteh Rue shared her story of her family’s history in grocery store management and her hopes of purchasing a building to expand her operations in the future. As a family-run business-owner, she is grateful that she and her family live in a supportive community like Willmar.

What business support do you need?



Overall, participants shared the following challenges and opportunities of businesses in the area:

Business Insights...

Challenges

- Business expansion is limited by workforce availability/# of employees
- Child care, housing and broadband are still significant challenges for workers/businesses
- Business owners are still hesitant to ask for help or may not know how to ask; a need for increased awareness/education
- Entrepreneurs need stronger business skills

Opportunities

- Funding and technical assistance help increase business appetite
- Technology and investments in marketing can help businesses
- The EDC and Ridgewater College can help with awareness, education and business skills
- Rising gas prices may be contributing to increased local shopping
- Our area is blessed with diverse businesses/people

Highlights of 2021 Accomplishments & Progress Toward Current Goals

Aaron Backman, EDC Executive Director, shared several key 2021 accomplishments and progress toward 2021 goals. (Key accomplishments can be found in *Appendices A: 2021 EDC Accomplishments and B: 2021 Strategic Planning Goals Update*.) Areas of note included:

- **COVID Business Assistance:** MPR grants to 60 businesses/6 nonprofits (\$844,000 total); Revolving Loan Funds to 4 businesses (\$127,500 total)
- **Industrial Development:** FedEx Distribution Center (a 217,325 sq. ft. facility on a 27-acre site)
- **Housing:** Unique Opportunities (two 72-unit multi-family housing buildings); Preserve on 24th (two multi-family housing buildings with 36 units each); Bethesda North Pointe (Senior housing project in New London with 24 independent living units, 18 assisted living and 18 memory care units); Block 25 Lofts (4-level 58-unit multi-family complex in Willmar's Renaissance Zone)
- **Workforce Development:** In-person Job Fair at Ridgewater College (50+ employers/300 job seekers); Workforce Solutions Summit (74 attendees); Virtual Job Fair (54 employers; 79 attendees); Diverse workforce training (CLUES, Ridgewater, CMJTS)
- **Elevate Community Business Academy:** Education/Mentorship program focused on creating economic opportunities for underserved minorities (12 students representing 10 businesses graduated from the first two cohorts); program recognized statewide through a Small Business Partnership Grant from MN DEED (\$76,000) to fund the program through June 2023 and allow the Fall 2022 class to be translated/taught in Somali. The EDC also received the 2021 Minnesota Association of Professional County Economic Developers' Outstanding Economic Development Program award.

Additional efforts helped advance child care, broadband, agriculture and marketing. Refer to the aforementioned appendices for detailed accomplishments.

Evaluating 2021 Strategic Priorities & Looking Toward Future Priorities

The group considered what areas of current priorities are working well, what might the EDC improve upon, and what might be missing or need greater attention from the EDC moving forward. In small group discussions, the following insights were lifted up ...

What's working well?

- The EDC's ability to collaborate, be innovative, and quick to act (noting that the EDC has a well-functioning team)
- The business support provided during/following COVID helped businesses persevere
- The EDC is effective in developing minority businesses; this was advanced by adding the Elevate program in 2021
- The EDC's involvement in job fairs and the Workforce Solutions Summit is a great start to being more engaged in workforce challenges
- The broad focus of the EDC aids in the support of all people, cultures, businesses
- The EDC's persistence is paying off in areas such as broadband, Highway 23 and child care

EDC's Strengths

- Well-functioning team
- Ability to partner/collaborate
- Quick to act
- Innovative thinking
- Gathers info to understand needs
- Measurable success toward goals
- Persistence – Broadband/Hwy 23

What could the EDC improve upon?

Participants shared insights that revealed six overarching areas with specific ideas for possible improvement (see image below.) Several participants sighted a need from innovative ways to support workforce development and overall business needs all across the county.

What could be improved?

Child Care and Housing

- Intentional focus/strategies
- Working with developers on a variety of housing options
- Incentives, subsidies, funding

EDC Branding/Communications

- Updated branding/logo
- Intentional marketing/awareness of services (particularly outside of Willmar)

Broader Countywide Engagement

- Engage and evaluate the needs of ALL communities in Kandiyohi County

Business Support

- Continue outreach momentum
- Education of services to more businesses
- More RLF/Micro Loans
- Business to business mentors

Showcasing Kandiyohi County

- Showcase the area/our successes
- Volunteers to share/tout area amenities

Greater Diversity on Boards/Committees

- Age, gender, geography, and cultures
- Cultural awareness for event planning

What is missing (or may need greater attention)?

Participants shared the following insights regarding areas that may benefit from more focused attention:

What is missing?

People Attraction/Recruitment

- Bring them back campaigns (students/young families)
- Focus on trailing spouses
- Attract entrepreneurs from other geographic areas

Career/Human Development

- Benefits of technical training/degrees
- Awareness of local jobs/careers
- Youth and adults reaching full potential

Broader Countywide Engagement

- Evaluate needs of ALL communities in Kandiyohi County
- Collaborate with other economic development groups/mayors
- Committee members as ambassadors
- Meetings held in locations across county
- Greater collaboration for tourism

Refugee Resettlement Planning

- Planning
- Awareness and education

Identifying Key Priorities for 2022-23

EDC Board and Committee Members and other participants explored and considered several potential priority areas for the EDC including, Child Care, Housing, Broadband, Maximizing Human Potential (Workforce Development), Countywide Engagement, Communications/Marketing, Business Support, and Agriculture. Discussions about these priorities revealed insights about the importance of these areas in building a strong economy:

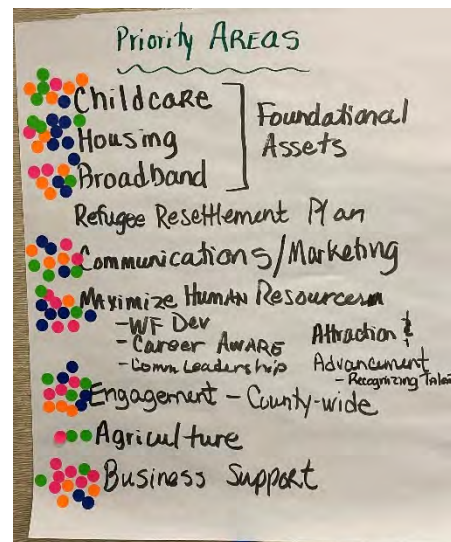
- Child Care, Housing and Broadband are key foundational assets
- Maximizing human potential includes:
 - Developing our current/future workforce
 - Building awareness of career opportunities
 - Recognizing talent/opportunities for advancement
 - Developing community leaders
 - Attracting people from outside the area
- Communication/marketing includes:
 - Improved branding/marketing of EDC and its services
 - Increased marketing of Kandiyohi County area—why live, work, play here
- Business Support—need to continue the momentum started through COVID
- More intentional countywide engagement can help ensure the EDC is supporting the economic development needs all across Kandiyohi County

Top Priority Areas

- Child Care
- Housing
- Broadband
- Maximizing Human Potential
- Countywide Engagement
- Communications/Marketing
- Business Support
- Agriculture

Following small and large group discussion, individual participants selected their top 4 priorities. The blue dots represented their top priority, the other colors are their second, third, and fourth rankings. Through this process and further discussion, participants ranked the key as follows:

1. Maximizing Human Potential
2. Housing
3. Countywide Engagement
4. Communications/Marketing
5. Business Support
6. Broadband
7. Child Care
8. Agriculture



Strategic Focus Areas for 2022-23

While all of these areas are important and will be part of the EDC’s efforts over the next 12-24 months, participants agreed that strategic focus and specific action plans should be developed for the priorities shown below. Breaking into groups according to their personal interests, the group worked to generate ideas for specific action items for each of these strategic focus areas. More detailed strategic goals and objectives can be found in *Appendix E*.

Strategic Focus Areas for 2022-2023 (As selected by participants)

Maximizing Human Potential

Helping every individual in Kandiyohi County reach their full potential through career awareness, training, and development

Countywide Engagement

Intentional outreach and engagement in communities all across Kandiyohi County to determine needs and provide awareness of EDC support and services

Communications/Marketing

Improved EDC branding and marketing strategies to reduce confusion about who we are/what we do

Housing

Developing alternative housing options to increase the availability of affordable workforce housing stock countywide

Business Support

Continued momentum of supporting existing businesses and fostering the growth of new business opportunities through appreciation, awareness, technical support, and access to funding

Next Steps

Participants of the 2022 EDC Strategic Planning Session made significant strides in developing a shared vision of success and key strategies that will guide the work of the Commission over the next 12 to 24 months. Initial action plans drafted for each focus area can be reviewed as *Appendix E: EDC Strategic Goals/Objectives 2022-2023*. EDC staff and committees will further define specific action items for each of the five priority areas and plans will be brought to the EDC Boards for further consideration.