

Lincoln County 2014 Strategic Plan

Prepared by:
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216 E. Lincoln Avenue
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Introduction and Overview

The Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation (LCEDF) organized a Countywide Strategic Planning Session on Wednesday, October 15, 2014, at the Lincoln High School from 6:00-9:00pm in order to gather information and feedback from the county's stakeholders, which includes citizens, local government officials, and partner organizations, on expanding and growing our local economy.

The work that all of us, as stakeholders, do on a daily basis is an integral part of our local economy whether it's through the services we provide, the jobs we create, the investments we make or a combination of all of the above. However, most of us have limited budgets and resources and can't always do what we want or need to do by ourselves. Because of that, it's important to understand the broader community's priorities so that we can develop partnerships and work together towards common goals.

The session was facilitated by Dan Steffen and James Foster of the Kansas Department of Commerce who have conducted similar strategic planning sessions for many other counties in north central and western Kansas. The session was promoted through several newspaper articles and advertisements, flyers around the community, social media, direct email and phone calls, and word-of-mouth.

The session was well attended by 80+ individuals representing a broad range of the county including: the county commission and staff (9), the city council members and staff of Lincoln (5), Barnard (1), and Sylvan Grove (7), economic development office (5), chamber of commerce (11), business owners (20+), property owners (60+), education board members and staff of USD 298 and USD 299 (7), hospital and healthcare board members and staff (3), senior citizens and young adults (16), along with the general public (50+).

Below is a summary of the strategic planning session following the agenda for the evening and including the various topics discussed and priorities that were developed.

What is Strategic Planning?

“Strategic planning is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it.” - John Bryson

The Lincoln County Economic Development Foundation (LCEDF) is a Kansas non-for-profit corporation organized for the purpose of helping county residents develop their community. The LCEDF was created in 1998 through a vote of county residents and funded by a two mill levy on property taxes. The LCEDF is managed by an executive director and over the course of its history has offered assistance to existing and new business owners through low-interest loans, business revitalization grants, and connecting people with potential outside partners and resources. The LCEDF also serves the county and city governments by marketing available properties and incentives to prospective businesses and residents through such programs as the Free Land program and the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone program.

As the organizer for the Countywide Strategic Planning Session, the LCEDF realizes that in order for it to best serve county residents, it must understand the current state of the county and what residents want for the future. This will allow the LCEDF to partner with other organizations on specific priorities and allocate resources as much as possible.



Photo credit: Jim Williams, Lincoln Sentinel-Republican

What is Economic Development?

By definition, economic development is very broad and consists of anything that brings new money into a community including: business development (through start-ups, expansion, and recruitment), workforce development (through education and training), community development (through improving infrastructure, housing improvements, and amenities), trade development (through increased manufacturing of products and services), and travel and tourism (through marketing and promotion).

In Lincoln County, none of these aspects of economic development are the sole responsibility of any one organization but instead distributed amongst a variety including the LCEDF, the Lincoln Area Chamber of Commerce, county and city governments, the schools, and other non-profits. Lincoln County is also very fortunate in that private businesses, such as banks, realize they have a vested interest in improving the economy and often become an active partner in specific projects.

The fact that so many organizations and individuals are directly tied to economic development only increases the need for strategic planning to ensure we are all working together in an effective and efficient manner.

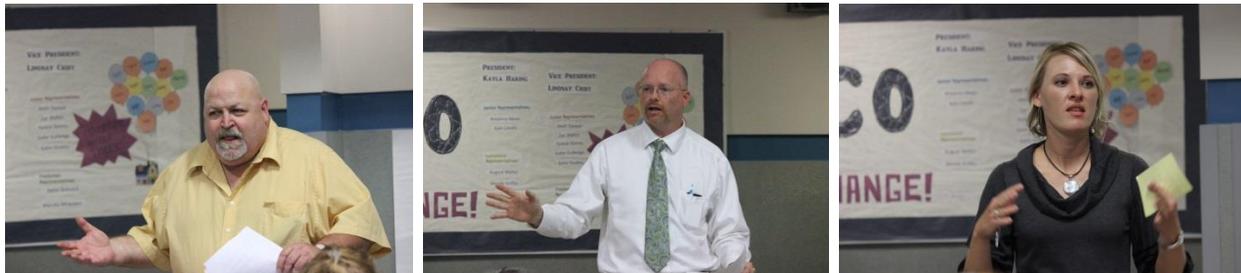


Photo credit: Jim Williams, Lincoln Sentinel-Republican

Identified Strengths and Weaknesses

The need to tie strategic planning and economic development was best described by a quote from Socrates, “We cannot become what we want to be, by remaining what we are.” In order for all of us to work together, we must first know what we are, what we want to become and then develop a plan for how to get there.

To review the ‘what we are’, the facilitators first reviewed current statistics for the county, and how we compare with surrounding counties (shown below). Statistics for counties to the east, such as Ottawa County, were not included since they were outside the facilitators service area and not readily accessible.

County	Job Growth & Decline 5/2008 to 5/2013	Percent Population Change 4/2010 to 7/2013	Unemployment Rate 8/2014
Ellsworth County	2.1%	-1.52%	2.90%
Jewell County	-17.1	-1.01	2.80
Lincoln County	-4.9	-2.9	4.20
Mitchell County	-0.02	0.08	3.60
Osborne County	-2.6	-1.04	3.80
Smith County	-3.1	-3.82	3.50
Russell County	3.5	-0.53	4.00

County	Median Wage Levels				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Ellsworth County	\$11.91	\$11.37	\$13.66	\$14.61	\$16.77
Jewell County	11.39	8.98	9.06	9.37	11.36
Lincoln County	10.74	11.37	11.51	12.38	13.08
Mitchell County	13.10	13.39	13.76	14.90	14.50
Osborne County	13.00	13.30	14.36	15.99	16.88
Smith County	10.28	10.18	11.92	10.35	11.72
Russell County	12.02	11.23	11.96	12.45	12.40

County	Small Business Development Center Counseling Hours			
	2010	2011	2012	2013
Ellsworth County	2.5	35.35	6.45	33.25
Jewell County	2.25	1.75	2.9	9.05
Lincoln County	9.3	8.8	0	0
Mitchell County	27.0	69.9	5.45	59.25
Osborne County	17.9	5.9	69.4	26.9
Smith County	129	79.1	161.9	116.4
Russell County	144.9	127.4	100.1	166.6

The facilitators then opened up the discussion for attendees to review various strengths and weaknesses that currently exist in the county.

Strengths (in no particular order)

- Low interest loan program (available through LCEDF)
- Participation in Rural Opportunity Zone program
- Neighborhood Revitalization Program available in Lincoln and Sylvan Grove
- Free Land program in Lincoln
- Countywide chamber of commerce
 - 108 members from across the county
 - Organize a variety of events
- Variety of civic organizations (i.e. Lions Clubs, boy and girl scouts, VFW, etc)
- Community clean-up committee
- Strong major employers
 - USD 298 and 299,
 - Lincoln County Hospital
 - Apac
 - US Towers (and expansion)
 - Lincoln County Manor
- Senior centers in both Lincoln and Sylvan Grove
- New USD 298 school is paid for
- Community events welcome at school

- Availability of meeting locations
- Vesper Community Center
- Development of wind energy
- Wind Energy Benefit (WEB) Fund
- Public Safety

Weaknesses (in no particular order)

- No housing assessment has been done
- Free Land program (is it working?)
- Availability of resources is not well known (i.e. Small Business Development Center, North Central Regional Planning Commission, NCKCN, etc)
- Condition of county roads
- Condition of city streets
- Dilapidated housing (lack of pride in taking care of personal property)
- Upgrades needed to water and sewer infrastructure
- Improvements needed to broadband and internet services
- Need for clear community identity (i.e. are we still the “Post Rock Capital” or is that no longer valued/important?)
- No large community center facility in largest community in the county
- Division between youth (less than 30 years old) and older generations (more than 30 years old)
- Polarization within the county amongst communities (the ‘invisible line’)



Photo credit: Jim Williams, Lincoln Sentinel-Republican

Identification and Prioritization of Issues

After the various strengths and weaknesses of the county were discussed, attendees broke into smaller groups to identify the issues they see the county facing and possible ideas for overcoming those issues. Each group then presented their thoughts to the entire group and, as there was overlap among many of those ideas, the facilitators grouped the ideas into similar categories (listed below).

After each group presented, all attendees were given one red arrow and five dots and were asked to 'vote' on the ideas they felt were the most important in the next couple years. The red arrows represented the one topic each attendee was most passionate about and would be willing to serve on a committee to assist with it. The yellow dots represented their other top priorities.

Below is a list of all the ideas that were presented (as they were grouped in to similar categories) and the top priorities that were 'voted' on by the attendees.

Top Priorities:

- 1) **Recruit a veterinarian to Lincoln County** – discussion included the lack of a local veterinarian for both small and large animals.
- 2) **Retention and attraction of the younger generation** – discussion included improving ties with younger alumni (considered those who are in the 18-50 age range), connecting with existing students in the elementary and high schools, increasing activities for kids, and improving communication with youth through social media.
- 3) **Improving housing in the county** – discussion included code enforcement for existing housing stock, availability of housing for new residents (homes and apartments), increasing the value of existing homes, and filling the financial gap between cost of building a new house and the value of the house after construction.
- 4) **Developing the travel and tourism industry to the county** – discussion included developing a strong community identity (i.e. is the 'post rock capital of Kansas' still important and relevant?), promoting existing assets, creating additional amenities such as bike and walking trails, developing new events, and building attractions such as a unique 'post rock landmark'.
- 5) **Developing and supporting entrepreneurship in the county** – discussion included assisting those who want to move to the county (such as alumni) transition their job and/or skills from a location-based job elsewhere and into a web-based job here in the county and developing hobby businesses into permanent businesses.
- 6) **Recruiting industry to the county** – discussion included increasing the number of jobs and the level of wages for employees.
- 7) **Improve cooperation and coordination across the county** – discussion included erasing/lessening the 'invisible line' between different communities, increasing communication between communities, and participating in the KS Pride Program (through the KSU Research and Extension office).

Other Ideas:

- 8) Improving broadband and internet services to the county – discussion included increasing internet speeds and the various internet providers and costs
- 9) Evaluating the Wind Energy Benefit (WEB) Fund – discussion included the low interest rate being earned by the fund and use of funds for infrastructure, grants, or other possibilities

- 10) Attracting businesses to the county – discussion included retail businesses, meat packing or butcher, restaurants, and other businesses
- 11) Improving public infrastructure – discussion included improving county and city roads, access to developing areas, water and sewer lines and overall transportation needs
- 12) Improving the aesthetics of our ‘main streets’ and highways
- 13) Constructing public restrooms in the parks and downtown
- 14) Developing youth sports – discussion included the baseball fields
- 15) Building on the school systems successes
- 16) Creating social gathering spaces – discussion included places to go in the evenings such as restaurants
- 17) Promoting communities as retirement communities – discussion included meeting needs of senior citizens
- 18) Creating a stronger connection to Wilson Lake
- 19) Re-evaluating the Free Land Program in Lincoln
- 20) Expanding the chamber of commerce’s involvement and activities
- 21) Utilizing and filling the old Sylvan Grove grade school

Next Steps

The next steps to move forward with these priorities are to create a strategic plan steering committee and a task force for each priority. The steering committee will be an oversight committee made up of representatives from the local governments, various boards and commissions, and other organizations. The role of the steering committee will be to keep track of progress on each task force, to communicate progress back to their respective boards, and to foster cross communication between each other.

The task forces will be working committees made up of individuals whose business and/or skills directly relate to the priority and any individual from the broader community who is interested and willing to donate their time and energy towards it. The role of each task force will be to ‘dig in’ and develop a plan for moving forward with each priority. Some priorities are broad in scope and may need additional input and/or a facilitated discussion of its own in order to best understand all the factors that have created the challenge and could impact a plan of action. The task forces will consider various ideas and come up with a strategy and next steps for moving forward.

The LCEDF director will begin to recruit individuals for both the steering committee and task forces as well as promote them to the broader public in order to gain volunteers for each. Meetings will be scheduled soon in order to keep all of these priorities fresh in people’s minds and momentum moving forward.

For individuals who have questions regarding the Countywide Strategic Planning Session, it’s priorities, and how to volunteer for a task force, they are welcome to contact:

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