

The Southeast Nebraska Development District (SEND) Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CED) is a document created as part of a five-year region-wide effort to assess, define, and accomplish the economic development goals of the region. In turn, the CED serves as a guide for regional economic/community development efforts by outlining goals, objectives and strategies formulated by business and community leaders. This chapter explores these goals, objectives, and strategies generated and approved by SEND's CED Strategy Committee following a series of meetings involving regional stakeholders.

SEND utilized press releases, direct solicitation, community meetings, public survey, and a public comment period to engage southeast Nebraska residents and businesses. During the events, nearly 150 area residents participated in the process, commenting on a variety of issues ranging from community and regional trends to specific topics. Information gathered during these meetings is reflected in the CED elements as a 15-county amalgamation. Additional data was collected utilizing an electronic survey that was distributed throughout SEND's service area. If a specific concern generated substantial discussion, supplemental conversations occurred; for example, disaster-related topics required follow-up sessions with business owners and emergency management personnel. To ensure wide public involvement, press releases were sent to area media outlets.

Following the data collection efforts, SEND's CED Strategy Committee discussed the collected information and determined four CED elements. These elements are broad, conceptual themes that include detailed goals. The element's goals are then subdivided into specific objectives. The objectives are further segregated into quantifiable strategies that comprise SEND's annual work plan. Each of the identified elements are designed to capitalize on the area's assets and improve the quality of life in the southeast Nebraska region. The order of the work plan's components is not indicative of priorities as all four elements contain important objectives and strategies. As noted, each identified element has performance strategies or measures to ensure progress is being made on a consistent basis. The Committee has identified individual projects they consider desirable to make certain that priorities are realized. This listing will be reviewed, revised, and amended on an annual basis as activities are accomplished and priorities change.

Element One: Placemaking - To cultivate a positive, health-promoting environment that capitalizes on the region's assets, prospects, and aspirations with the intent of promoting happiness and well-being of area residents. SEND staff will undertake *placemaking* activities to support and encourage inclusive, dynamic regionalized thinking and improve the region's status on the map as a healthy "place" for individuals, families, and businesses.

Goal: Improve access to healthcare and healthy lifestyles as part of a larger strategy for fostering a 'successful growth community'. Specific elements include access to primary and critical care, availability of affordable, healthy food, and access to green space and other healthy lifestyle built environments.

Objectives:

1. Collaborate with communities and healthcare providers to maintain, support, and expand the region's strong network of primary care providers, hospitals, and assisted living and extended-care centers. SEND staff will participate in regional healthcare events as needed.

2. Share information regarding rural healthcare on the organization's social media sites as well as our monthly e-newsletter, including job openings, trainings, transit schedules, and events.
3. SENDD's region has a high percentage of older adults (aged > 65). Staff will collaborate with area agencies and long-term care facilities to support their efforts. Examples might include working to secure funds to improve senior centers, remove environmental barriers, and grow services. SENDD will connect with a minimum of three centers annually to discuss their concerns.
4. Many of the communities in SENDD's rural areas are considered food deserts. Work with communities to establish local food options, partner with the University of Nebraska's Regional Food Systems program, support rural grocery stores, explore options such as mobile grocery stores, alternative funding, and food cooperatives. SENDD will pursue grants to support these activities.
5. Work with transit providers to address the challenges of individuals with barriers to healthcare, such as older adults, low to moderate income populations, and individuals with temporary obstacles. SENDD will meet with regional transit providers on an annual basis to identify funding opportunities and potential partnerships.

Goal: To increase the availability of affordable, quality housing. The availability of safe, affordable housing can determine the direction of a region's economy. Communities that cultivate this investment tend to grow. SENDD has identified workforce housing as a key priority.

Objectives:

1. SENDD will work with developers, community leaders, homeowners, and state programs to renovate a minimum of 15 homes annually. The majority of houses in the SENDD region were constructed before 1980. While the housing stock is older, it creates opportunities for first time home buyers.
2. SENDD will investigate the potential of regional acquisition, rehabilitation, resale (ARR) program designed to meet the needs of a lifestyle regardless of income. The objective will be to revitalize existing housing stock by adding contemporary housing demands, such as additional storage, wiring that meets today's standards, larger garages, etc. If potential success looks likely, SENDD will pursue and develop the program, which would include at a minimum five homes annually.
3. Utilizing the agency's social media and e-newsletter, SENDD will distribute information on rental programs, funding resources, and provide RentWise trainings to stakeholders (as requested). Lack of rental units has been identified as a top housing priority for the region. SENDD will collaborate with area economic developers, SENAHC, SEND, Inc., elected officials, and other key partners to educate housing developers on opportunities for construction of quality, affordable rental units.
4. SENDD will work with member communities to create local and regional resources to be used for demolition of decaying buildings. Many communities in the SENDD region struggle to eliminate dilapidated or vacant buildings. Removing these substandard structures would allow communities to take advantage of existing infrastructure and save development costs.

5. SENDD will partner with the Nebraska Regional Officials Council (NROC) and the Omaha Land Bank to expand land bank programs across the state. This will allow local jurisdictions to remove substandard and blighted, decaying structures. SENDD will advocate for this change in state statutes at local and state levels.
6. Because lack of housing resources is an ongoing issue, SENDD will continue to capture state and federal resources to expand housing opportunities. These might include Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), Housing Trust Fund (HTF), and Nebraska Investment Finance Authority (NIFA). SENDD will submit a minimum of three grant applications annually.
7. Identify new partnerships with area organization to expand housing opportunities. These might include community action agencies, NeighborWorks, and others. SENDD staff will visit with these organizations annually to discuss ways to improve programs and relationships.
8. Build out/supplement building inspection, nuisance abatement, and code enforcement activities for local jurisdictions. At least one SENDD staff will become a certified building inspector. Member jurisdictions will be offered this service.

Goal: Education represents the foundation of a strong workforce. Unlike some areas of the nation, the SENDD district has a very good network of learning opportunities beginning with local schools and extending through technical schools, community colleges, and higher education institutions. In spite of a strong education infrastructure, gaps and weaknesses remain. In particular, limited access for early childhood learning and negative perceptions of alternatives to post-secondary education.

1. SENDD will collaborate with high schools, Southeast Community College (SCC), area economic development professionals, other higher education institutions, and chambers of commerce to address the trend of mechanization. Activities include information sharing, actively participating in regional workforce activities, and identifying funding sources to offset training costs for employers. Based on trends, local economic developers understand that automation in industry will happen; however, there are steps that can be taken to mitigate the forecasted impacts on workers and communities, including up-training and reeducating the existing workforce and preparing schools to train students for the new work environments.
2. Expanding options for curriculum-based, early childhood education is a priority. SENDD will explore funding alternatives at private, local, state, and federal levels to address this need. Communities report limited options for workforce in regards to placing children in safe, meaningful environments. Early childhood education is critical for workforce development.
3. Identify a message for secondary and post-secondary students that a four-year degree should not be considered in isolation. Other options include two-year degrees, technical and trade schools, which are high-demand and well-paying. SENDD will incorporate this effort into the CEDS process, and partner with key stakeholders to ensure success.
4. The agency will collaborate with local economic development professionals, community leaders, educators, and other partners to craft an area-wide program to encourage local students to remain in the region and seek job options. In spite of many job opportunities, the SENDD region struggles to attract and retain young workers.

Goal: Healthcare, housing, education, and other aspects are the building blocks for developing a high quality of life. History, strong work ethic, family focused, collaboration, and volunteerism add context to this foundation. The 15 counties in southeast Nebraska holds a high degree of community pride for this 'place'.

1. The region has several destinations for tourism; SENDD will collaborate with area chambers, economic developers, local and state partners to increase awareness about these sites through marketing efforts. Activities such as posting events on SENDD's social media and webpage, capturing state resources, and identifying innovative ways to grow the tourism industry. Tourism continues to be a priority for jurisdictions; SENDD will support our member communities.
2. Wealth Works is an asset-mapping tool used to identify forms of community-based capital; SENDD will connect with the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) to initiate and utilize the Wealth Works model in a minimum of two southeast Nebraska communities. If successful, SENDD will expand Wealth Works to other towns.
3. SENDD will collaborate with member communities, the Nebraska Recycling Council, and Keep Nebraska Beautiful to expand environmental awareness and recycling activities. This might be reflected in participating in events, preparing grants for jurisdictions, sharing information, and growing partnerships. Due to the reliance on agriculture, southeast Nebraska residents recognize that they must be good stewards of the land. SENDD has a responsibility to assist in this capacity.
4. Creating the next generation of leaders is vital for the SENDD region; SENDD will assist communities to grow strong local decision makers through a variety of activities, including the Nebraska's Economic Development Certified Community and Certified Leadership Community programs, and supporting Civic Nebraska's Civic Health Index. Leadership is critical for building momentum to move ideas forward.
5. Update CEDS as needed to reflect changing patterns, trends, and regional needs.