
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC PLAN

The primary purpose of the formulation of this Economic Development Strategic Plan is to define a series of workable strategies which, when implemented can result in the future expansion of the tax base, economy and population of the City of Benkelman, Nebraska and, in turn, Dundy County.

In order to define such strategies, it is first necessary to identify current economic development efforts in the Community including the processes involved, the human resources used and the methods of financing the development efforts. Doing so will allow an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the current economic development efforts which can then be used to formulate workable strategies to enhance development in and around Benkelman.

CURRENT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

Research indicates that neither the City of Benkelman nor Dundy County has an organized economic development entity or program in place.

The lack of a local economic development program and the lack of organized entities to initiate, finance and implement economic enhancement efforts in the City of Benkelman has and will limit the ability of its citizens to maintain a viable Community through the Planning Period.

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND ASSETS

In order to formulate valid and workable economic enhancement strategies it is vital to identify the strengths and assets that the Community has to offer to prospective residents, businesses and industry. Fortunately for the City of Benkelman, the community has a number of strengths and assets which are supportive of expanding the local economy, enhancing the tax base and stabilizing or increasing the population. These strengths and assets include:

- An attribute of the Community related to its geographic location is that it is located at nearly one hour by roadway from any other larger urban area. Due to this location, the Community has been able to maintain a good variety of retail businesses and excellent health care facilities and services. This is an important attribute as it allows its citizens to enjoy the “small town” lifestyle without sacrificing the need for easy access to a wide variety of retail goods and business and health care services.
- Another asset that the Community has is the Dundy County - Stratton Public School District and the location of the educational facilities in Benkelman. This school district has an excellent reputation for providing a quality education and the district has quality facilities.
- Another asset of the City of Benkelman is its geographic location within the very scenic Republican River valley and its location near the River. The scenic quality of the River provides the opportunity to attract more tourists to the area and the City.
- Another asset is the existence of the Burlington Northern Railroad line which connects Benkelman to Denver and Lincoln and points beyond.

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- A fourth, and not to be overlooked asset of the Community is the pride that the past and current citizens and school alumni have for the community. This asset has the potential to provide substantial impetus for financial support for community improvement projects by these individuals.
 - Finally, an attribute that the Community can rightfully claim is the “quality of life” enjoyed by its citizens. The “everyone knowing everybody in town” attribute is one that should not be overlooked because this relationship between the citizens of the Community results in the ability for all its citizens, whether it is those with children or the elderly, to live with little fear of criminal activity or other negative factors while enjoying the numerous active and passive recreational opportunities, the clean air, the access to churches, the access to retail goods, the access to excellent health care and educational services and the overall good life available in the Community.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WEAKNESSES

Any economic development strategic plan must also recognize the weaknesses of the Community in order to formulate strategies that are workable and scaled to the abilities of the Community and its citizens. Not unlike other smaller urban areas, the City of Benkelman has several weaknesses which must be recognized. These include:

- Many businesses and industries which may wish to find a location in Nebraska will want to be located near Interstate highways. Given the geographic location of the City of Benkelman nearly 80 miles south of Interstate 80 and some 50 miles north of Interstate 70 it will prove very difficult to attract outside businesses and industries into the Community.
- The Mayor and City Council, the Dundy County Chamber of Commerce, local Jaycees and a limited number of other community groups appear to be the only entity that initiates and implements community improvement projects. The lack of any other organization or entity with the specific purpose of actively identifying and implementing economic enhancement programs and projects is an indication that the Community is being re-active rather than pro-active when it comes to economic enhancement efforts.
- The relatively small population of the City implies that there are a limited number of persons who would be willing to volunteer to serve on an economic enhancement committee or entity.
- A fourth weakness in the current economic enhancement efforts in Benkelman is that there is not a notable amount of on-going funding or fund-raising for such efforts.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Prior to the formulation of specific economic enhancement strategies it is necessary to establish the Community’s goals with regard to economic development so that such goals can be used as guideposts for the formulation and implementation of specific economic development strategies. In this Comprehensive Plan for the City of Benkelman there is a “Community Goals and Objectives” component. In this component there are goals which were established previously in the formulation of this Plan to guide economic enhancement efforts in the Community. These include:

Economic Development Goals

Economic Development Goal 1

The City of Benkelman should promote the recreational aspects of the community to attract visitors to the area.

Objectives

- ED-1.1 The City needs to develop a strategy for exploiting local hunting and fishing opportunities.
- ED-1.2 The City needs to work with Dundy County to identify all zoning needs in order to accomplish specifics that may fall outside the City's jurisdiction.
- ED-1.3 The City needs to work with Dundy County and adjacent counties to identify a specific auto tour of the Southwest Nebraska area, using Benkelman as the center of the area.
- ED-1.4 Work with the Department of Economic Development's Tourism Division to promote the recreational aspects of Benkelman, Dundy County and the southwest region.
- ED-1.5 Work with the youth of the community to continually determine what additional recreational needs there are in Benkelman.

Economic Development Goal 2

Benkelman needs to promote itself as a place to retire, relax, and recreate.

Objectives

- ED-2.1 The City along with property owners need to identify key housing needs and strategies in cooperation with the Housing Market Analysis in order to attract a retiring population.
- ED-2.2 Key retail goods and services needed for supporting a retiree community must be identified and established.
- ED-2.3 Work with the Nebraska Department of Economic Development and West Central Nebraska Development District to identify potential funding sources to attract businesses including new business start-ups.
- ED-2.4 Work with the Nebraska Department of Economic Development and West Central Nebraska Development District to identify potential funding sources to attract retirees to southwest Nebraska.
- ED-2.5 Update zoning and other codes in the community to allow for different types of uses such as golf carts and other low speed transportation.
- ED-2.6 Work with the Dundy County Hospital to insure that there will be proper facilities to care for the retiring population.
- ED-2.7 Work with the Dundy County Hospital and the nursing home facility to develop an "aging in place" development that allows the senior population to move from low maintenance self-supported housing through assisted living to full care.
- ED-2.8 Establish new and expanded infrastructure/technologies throughout the community needed to support aspects of this population, including:
 - Charging stations and parking for golf carts
 - Additional handi-bus support
 - Walking trails

Economic Development Goal 3

Expand the existing retail, service, and industrial base in Benkelman

Objectives

- ED-3.1 Identify new retail businesses and services that will be needed to support Economic Development Goals 1 and 2.
- ED-3.2 Establish an entrepreneurship/investment group that will work with and financially support new ideas for business and industry in Benkelman.
- ED-3.3 Declare the area around the intersection of Nebraska Highway 61 and U.S. Highway 34 as blighted and substandard.
- ED-3.4 Identify funding sources available from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development and West Central Nebraska Development District for construction of new production/warehousing facilities near the intersection of the two highways.
- ED-3.5 Establish tax increment financing as an element of the community's overall incentive tool kit.
- ED-3.6 Expand infrastructure to the north to support new commercial and industrial business near and around the intersection of Nebraska Highway 61 and U.S. Highway 34.
- ED-3.7 Identify other areas of the community where redevelopment activity needs to be undertaken.
- ED-3.8 Develop a business transition program that will allow existing business owners to sale out their business to someone else at retirement.
- ED-3.9 Tap into the existing telecommunication infrastructure to expand the economic reach of local businesses.
- ED-3.10 Develop a new business incubator for individuals/businesses that are start-ups needing to minimize their immediate overhead and expenses.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Based upon the findings of the evaluation of the existing economic enhancement efforts, the strengths, assets and weaknesses of the City of Benkelman and the goals and objectives proposed to guide future economic enhancement efforts, the strategies listed below have been formulated. These strategies represent an expansion and clarification of the economic enhancement goals and objectives and are presented in a recommended order of priority based upon the abilities, the time and the effort required to implement each strategy, prerequisites for each strategy and current and future funding and manpower availability.

1. Establish local economic enhancement entities necessary to the successful implementation of the strategies outlined in this Economic Development Strategic Plan.

- The Mayor and City Council should seek out local citizens willing to volunteer to serve on a Board of Directors to establish a Benkelman Community Development Foundation. This Foundation should be created as a non-profit 501c3 qualified corporation to allow individuals, businesses and other legal entities to make tax deductible contributions to the Foundation for the purpose of establishing a perpetual endowment fund. The Board of Directors of the Foundation should seek assistance from accountants, bankers and lawyers to establish an understanding of how best to solicit contributions from estates, life insurance and other donor opportunities so that the tax and other benefits can be effectively communicated to prospective donors for establishment of a perpetual endowment fund of \$500,000 over the

next 10 years for community and economic development. The Board should market the creation of the proposed endowment fund to a nation-wide list of prospective members who are current or past citizens or alumni of the local School District.

- The Mayor and City Council should encourage interested individuals in and around the City to create a “for-profit” Benkelman Investment Club, LLC. Individuals participating in this Club, a limited liability company, would make a monthly investment in the Club. The Club would utilize the investment fund to seek out investment opportunities in new or expanded housing and businesses which can enhance the local tax base, enhance local housing opportunities and generate additional employment opportunities, while generating profits for the Club members.

2. Establish methods of funding the local economic enhancement efforts to provide one-time and on-going financing for the enhancement efforts.

- The Mayor and City Council should seek the approval of a local sales tax under LB840 to assist in funding local economic enhancement efforts. Proceeds from this sales tax should be used for low-interest loans, loan guarantees and performance-based grants for projects which will enhance the tax base, add employment or add population to the City. Possible uses for these sales tax funds would include business recruitment and business expansions or start-ups.
- The City should maintain membership in the West Central Nebraska Development District to allow the City to improved access to economic development expertise and to seek grant funds for economic development.
- The Board of Directors of a newly formed Benkelman Community Development Foundation, and the City should seek economic development grant funds through the West Central Nebraska Development District, the purpose of which will be provide funding for a series of programs and projects designed to enhance the Benkelman economy and tax base. These programs and projects are described in several of the following economic enhancement strategies.
- The Mayor and City Council should appoint a Community Redevelopment Authority. The purpose of the Authority shall be to encourage housing, business, industrial development through the active marketing of the opportunity to utilize Tax Increment Financing. Once established, said Authority should establish a tax increment financing policy that specifies that for any TIF project at least 10% of the TIF revenues generated for the developer shall be in the form of an application fee to be charged for the establishment of a TIF contract. The application fee could be set up on a graduated scale, depending on the size of the TIF project. This revenue should then be used to help fund the economic enhancement program.

3. Maintain and support existing businesses.

- Working through the Dundy County Chamber of Commerce and Development, establish a business retention committee, comprised of local citizens, to maintain contact with businesses in the community on at least a semi-annual basis, to determine needs of existing businesses

where the community might be of assistance and to help identify prospective buyers of businesses when the owner desires to sell.

- The business retention committee should spearhead alternative approaches to replacing any businesses that are lost due to owner retirement, death or catastrophe, with particular attention to those businesses that provide convenience goods to the local community including particularly groceries. Where it is not possible to maintain a private business to provide convenience goods, a community cooperative should be established, preferably in a downtown building and preferably a building that needs to be rehabilitated.

4. Enhance the potential for additional industrial and / or commercial development in the Benkelman Area.

- Establish industrial / commercial zoning on a site north of the intersection of Nebraska Highways 61 and U. S. Highway 34 adjoining and an additional industrial / commercial site along the rail line.
- Promote the existence of this site through cooperation with the Nebraska Public Power District Economic Development Division and the Nebraska Department of Economic Development as well as on the local community web site.
- If the Utilities Department budget for the City does not already have a sinking fund for financing the expansion of the water and sewer mains, such a fund should be established and potentially utility rates should be adjusted to fund the sinking fund for the purpose of eventually extending water and sewer utilities to this industrial / commercial site.

5. Maintain and enhance an internet web site and literature to promote the City of Benkelman and its economic enhancement efforts.

- The Board of Directors of the Benkelman Community Development Foundation should seek the assistance of the Dundy County Chamber of Commerce and Development in expand the web site information to include information regarding the Benkelman Community Development Foundation and it fund raising efforts to establish a perpetual endowment fund, the Benkelman Investment Club, LLC , the proposed industrial sites and incentives available for businesses seeking a location. Such web site should promote the “quality of life” in the Community, the availability and affordability of housing, employment opportunities, school information, senior services and events, recreational opportunities, particularly related to the Republican River and do so in a graphic eye-catching manner as opposed to quoting statistics.
- The Board of Directors of the Foundation should seek the assistance of the Nebraska Public Power District Economic Development Division and the Dundy County Chamber of Commerce and Development in the design and creation of mail-out literature which would promote the Community, the School, describe the Foundation’s economic enhancement endowment and seek donations to such endowment.

6. Enhance the quality of the living environment in the physical attractiveness of the Community and create additional housing and business opportunities in the Community.

- The Mayor and City Council should identify all buildings in the Community, residential and commercial, which are such poor condition that rehabilitation is not financially feasible. The City should seek community development block grant (CDBG) funding through the West Central Nebraska Development District to assist in the cost of acquiring the identified buildings and lots, clearing such lots and making the lots available for redevelopment to persons who do not now reside in Benkelman at no cost or to people now residing in Benkelman at a very minimal cost. The CDBG funds should also be used in connection with Tax Increment Financing to provide downpayment assistance and a reduced property tax load to make it very attractive for persons to build a new home or business in the Community, thus enhancing the population and the tax base.

7. Enhance recreation opportunities in the Community to attract additional tourists and population to the Community.

- The Mayor and City Council should seek the assistance of the West Central Nebraska Development District in applying for grant assistance from the Nebraska Department of Roads in establishing an enhanced sidewalk system and a new trail system to provide enhanced access to all major facilities in the Community and to enhance the recreational offerings. The City should utilize Safe Routes to School grant funds to allow the repair of existing sidewalks and construction of new sidewalks to realize the proposed arterial sidewalk system and utilize Transportation Enhancement grant funds and land owner participation for development of the hiking / biking trail system.

8. Enhance the ability to attract tourists to the Community.

- Install a well-designed, lighted “Welcome to Benkelman” sign at the intersection of Highway 61 and Highway 34. Such sign should incorporate the “Citizens working together to make a good community better” slogan.
- The Board of Directors of the Community Development Foundation should seek the assistance of the Upper Republican Natural Resource District to investigate the feasibility of establishing a scenic river walk along Republican River extending from the west edge of the Community east to the County Fair Grounds.

9. Maximize housing opportunities for all income and age groups to attract additional residents to the Community and the school district.

- The Mayor and City Council should seek the continued assistance of the West Central Nebraska Development District in applying for Community Development Block Grant funds for financing an on-going housing rehabilitation program. Such rehabilitation and updating of the existing housing units which are in need of rehabilitation will not only enhance the overall attractiveness of the Community, but will maintain and improve existing lower cost housing.

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- The City should request the assistance of the Benkelman Housing Authority in the acquisition and rehabilitation of existing housing units to allow access to funding other than CDBG funds.

10. Establish and implement a new business / industry incubation program to expand employment opportunities in and around the City and to enhance the tax base.

- The Benkelman Community Development Foundation and the Benkelman Investment Club, in a joint funding effort with Dundy County, the City of Benkelman and the West Central Development District should provide the funding and research expertise to establish an effective business / industry incubation program based on the following factors and steps:
 - Identification of persons with expertise in the fields of patents, manufacturing equipment design, market research and marketing, business management and finance to be utilized when potential products with at least a national market are identified.
 - Identification of probable costs for services of the persons with the various expertise noted above.
 - Creation of a business / industry incubation brochure / flyer to be used to solicit ideas for new businesses / industries from area residents.
 - Identification of potential products to be manufactured and marketed and business activities which can successfully located in the Benkelman area. Ideally, the first efforts in this identification process would involve a prospective new business / industry where grant funds are available to conduct a majority of the incubation research needed to establish such business / industry.
 - Establish an incubated business / industry financing group, such as the Benkelman Investment Club LLC, as a corporation to finance the development of any incubated business / industry. Such financing group would own the business / industry with the provision that the person or persons from whom the product idea came from will receive royalties or other compensation for the idea and will have the opportunity to purchase the business / industry at market value.

It is recommended that the City seek the active participation of the West Central Development District staff in developing the expertise and research capabilities needed to successfully implement this incubation program. This would allow the application of these expertise and research capabilities to the larger region with greater potential for funding of these efforts.

If the West Central Development District agrees to lead the implementation of this incubation program, an additional fee to the District should be established. At least initially this fee would be paid by Dundy County and the City of Benkelman as well as other counties and communities in the West Central Development District service area. Given the need to develop sufficient financial resources to successfully implement this incubation program, an annual support of at least \$10,000 per year from the City and the County will be needed.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINES

Successful implementation of the economic development strategies set forth in this Plan will require time, talent and money. It will also require a commitment to a timetable to implement this Plan. To develop and acquire the talent needed for implementation of these strategies and to generate the funding needed, a series of time lines are suggested for the various economic development strategies list above. These time lines are based upon current economic development projects and the complexity and funding requirements of these strategies. Suggested time lines for each strategy are as follows:

- Strategies 1 through 5 and part of Strategies 9 and 10 - Suggested time line: 2 YEARS
 - Establish local economic enhancement entities,
 - Establish methods of financing economic enhancement efforts,
 - Maintain and support existing businesses.
 - Establish a industrial / commercial development site,
 - Establish a community internet web site,
 - Establish local County and City funding for industry / business incubation program
 - Establish housing rehabilitation program to enhance housing opportunities in the Community.

- Strategies 6 and 9 – Suggested time line: 3 YEARS
 - Enhance attractiveness of the Community through removal of existing dilapidated buildings,
 - Enhance recreation facilities in the Community,
 - Enhance the ability to attract tourists to the Community,
 - Continuation of housing rehabilitation program to enhance housing opportunities in the Community.

- Strategy 10 – Suggested time line: 4 YEARS
 - Implementation of industry / business incubation program.

In addition to establishing time lines for implementation of these strategies, a method of assessing the progress being made in implementing each strategy is needed to assure that the process is on-going and going in the right direction. A method of performance review that is recommended is that each development entity involved in the implementation of these strategies establish a quarterly review schedule.

It would be advisable to have joint meetings with the Benkelman Community Foundation, the Benkelman Investment Club, the Dundy County Chamber of Commerce and Development, the West Central Development District, the Dundy County Board of Commissioners and the City of Benkelman for these quarterly meetings so that each entity can discern where each other entity is at in the implementation process and modify their approach to their responsibilities for economic development action as needed.

At each performance review meeting, the progress for each applicable strategy should be assessed relative to the overall time line.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY RESPONSIBILITIES

If implementation of these economic development strategies is to be successful, delineation of what individual or group of individuals is to be responsible for each step in the implementation of each strategy is critical.

When each local economic development entity initiates action on implementing the applicable strategy or strategies, each task should be assigned to someone or some group along with a deadline in accordance with the above recommended timelines for completion of each task. In this manner it will be possible to keep the implementation steps on target and on-time relative to the overall time line for each strategy.

SUMMARY

This Economic Development Strategic Plan and the strategies for expanding the population, economy and tax base of Benkelman are necessarily aggressive. It may appear to some citizens that implementation of the strategies within the time lines herein proposed will be impossible. However, the citizens of Benkelman and its trade area and the alumni of the Community and the Dundy County - Stratton School District have already proven that “it can be done”. They have maintained and improved educational opportunities in the Community, they have maintained a very good variety of recreational facilities for a small Community and have maintained a very good utilities and street system. The result has been that the City of Benkelman, even in the face of a nearly 30% decline in the rural population in Dundy County over the last 30 years, has been able to minimize the loss of population. These actions and a loss of only an average of 16 persons each year over the last 30 proves that Benkelman is an attractive a place to live, educate children and enjoy the “small town” quality of life.

It is absolutely critical that the citizens and governing body of the City of Benkelman understand that in today’s economy if a small community is not going forward i is in reality going backward. If the City of Benkelman is to retain its quality of life, its excellent education and health care systems and the amenities available in and around the Community, its citizens must realize that the Community must continue to grow its population, local employment opportunities and its tax base and make the personal and financial commitment to make that happen.

It is suggested that this Economic Development Strategic Plan be implemented under the “can-do” slogan of “CITIZENS WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE A GOOD TOWN BETTER.”