

*City of Curtis, Nebraska*  
**STRATEGIC PLAN**  
**2017**

*Prepared by:*



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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Goals .....	2
Short-Term Goals .....	3
Mid-Term Goals .....	8
Additional Project Notes.....	11

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# Introduction

The City of Curtis is located in the northwest portion of Frontier County which is situated in the southwest corner of Nebraska. The 2010 U.S. Census shows Curtis's total population as 939. The Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture (NCTA) is located in Curtis and serves as a two-year post-secondary school. NCTA brings students from all over the world to participate in their many agriculture and technical programs. NCTA's student population impacts the City of Curtis. Of the 939 residents, 156 are 18 to 20 years old which is the typical age of students attending NCTA. Over the past four school-years, NCTA has experienced growth and student enrollment has more than doubled since 2010, with a fall 2017 enrollment total of 255 full-time on campus students. Although NCTA has experienced growth, overall the City of Curtis has seen a decline in population with the 2012-2016 ACS data reporting a total population of 830 ( $\pm 108$ ). With NCTA comprising more than 16 percent of the total population, the City must attend to the needs of the students as well as focus on the needs of permanent residents.

The City of Curtis recognizes the importance of having an active and safe community. Not only were they one of the first communities to pass LB840, but they have also completed many planning endeavors to assist with new growth and development in the community. For example, in 2010, they completed a 10-year Comprehensive Plan and a Blight/Substandard Redevelopment Plan; in 2014 they completed a Housing Market Study; and at this present time, they are filling the requirements to become a Leadership Community so they can keep improving the quality of life for their residents. Prior to the planning process for this Strategic Plan, the City completed a Community Needs Assessment Survey which analyzed a multitude of aspects which affect the quality of life for residents in Curtis. Based on the survey results, residents wanted to find ways to stabilize the population (slow the overall decline), enhancing community spaces, improve the quality of life through enriched amenities and services, and extend economic development efforts to maximize commercial growth.

To ensure the City is continually working to meet the needs of all residents, City leaders have decided to complete a Strategic Plan. This Strategic Plan is a road map that helps guide the City through the next five years. The City's Strategic Plan lays out the path for the direction of the City and the tactics that will be used to help them succeed. Curtis will lead the way in building a solid community through marketing the readily available housing and land, improve public infrastructure, and upgraded public safety services to ensure Curtis is a community that not only maintains the current population, but also helps it grow. By doing so the City will strive to effectively and efficiently develop and strengthen assets that contribute to a City that is a great place to live, work, and play.

Communities, much like businesses and individuals, must set goals to establish strategies which will lead towards accomplishing priorities. City leaders need to have clear goals, along with strategies on how they are going to reach these goals. These goals need to be comprehensive in nature, looking at every aspect of the community, and they must all align with a single vision for the future of the community. Goal setting at the community-level may be more challenging because of the varying aspects and components City leaders must constantly assess and direct in order to grow and change in an organized, efficient, and effective manner. Within the Strategic Plan, the goals are broken into two categories: short-term and mid-term goals. The short-term goals will be the ideas that the City will be able to achieve in a 1 to 2-year time period. While, the mid-term goals will follow a 3 to 5-year implementation timeline because they may be larger goals with a longer process to implement or may not be as high of a priority. Long-term goals with an implementation timeline of 5-10+ years can be found in the Comprehensive Plan.

# Goals

## Short-Term Goals

- Enforce City Ordinances
- Demolish Dilapidated Structures
- Evaluate Existing & Potential Redevelopment Areas
- Develop "Spec" Building for Business Development
- Increase Marketing Efforts

## Mid-Term Goals

- Promote Infill Development
  - Residential
  - Commercial
- Maintain Public Infrastructure
- Target Prime Commercial Property

# Short-Term Goals

The City of Curtis has several short-term goals that they will work to complete over the next one to two years. Each goal has a list of objectives to complete in order to accomplish the goal. Many of these objectives will be completed by the City, both staff and elected officials; however, not all of the goals and objectives should solely rest on the shoulders of the City. Many other community groups and organizations will need to assist the City in order to see these projects through.

## Enforce City Ordinances

All vacant lots and vacant, uninhabitable homes are potential properties for infill development. A strong nuisance abatement program, whether completed by the City and legal counsel or by a third-party source, is important to encourage property upkeep and provide ways for the City to appropriately encourage renovations or property demolition of non-compliant, unsafe structures. Nuisance abatement is the enforcement of nuisance codes in the City, to bring properties in compliance with City codes. The process includes City Council approval and authority, code review, letters mailed to non-compliant property owners, periods of time to allow property owners to abate any nuisances, and further legal action if necessary when working with non-compliant property owners. A Nuisance Abatement Program and enforcement of regular City ordinances is important to residents and City leaders to ensure properties are maintained and efforts are being made to rid the community of unnecessary eye sores and potential safety and health hazards preferably before it gets to a point where the unit has to be demolished entirely.

Enforcing City ordinances is an on-going task because of the process that is required for nuisance abatement as well as the ever-changing personal habits of property owners. The City has existing codes and ordinances, but it will take a group effort in order to enforce the regulations including final enforcement by the City Council, local law enforcement, and the City's legal counsel. During the community needs assessment survey residents expressed concern with the increasing properties that are becoming dilapidated and not well maintained. The City will complete the following steps in order to ensure necessary enforcement is completed:

- Encourage regular reconnaissance of the community;
- Ensure all properties are analyzed equally;
- Review and update existing Ordinances to fit the needs of the City;
- Provide authority to the correct persons to pursue non-compliant properties;
- Follow-through with recommendations from authority in-charge of pursuing non-compliant properties; and
- Complete abatement and structure removal process, as necessary, for property clean-up.



## **Demolish Dilapidated Structures**

The City recognizes and understands this need to get rid of deteriorating structures and considers it to be a priority. All vacant lots and vacant uninhabitable homes are properties that could be utilized for infill development. The City should continue to access different avenues available to them to assist with the clean-up of vacant lots and uninhabitable properties. Uninhabitable homes become a burden to the community affecting the tax base, aesthetics, and overall leading to blighted conditions of the neighborhood.

The 2014 Housing Study indicates that 16 of the 426 total housing units are severely dilapidated, beyond repair. Commercial and secondary structures have not been fully assessed; however, there is a definite need for structure demolition within the residential neighborhoods. A few resources the City can utilize to demolish dilapidated structures and encourage improvements to properties include the following: Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds, City-funds to acquire/demolish dilapidated properties, grants for Owner-Occupied Housing Rehabilitation (which Curtis already participates in), and nuisance abatement to encourage private property owners to improve their properties.

All vacant lots and vacant, uninhabitable structures are properties that could be utilized for infill residential and commercial development. The City should access different avenues to assist with the clean-up of vacant lots and uninhabitable properties. Only a minimal amount of lots are currently available for infill development; therefore, efforts should be made to create more availability. Also, by cleaning up vacant lots and uninhabitable structures the City will be able to rid the community of unnecessary eye sores, safety and health hazards. A clean community is attractive to visitors, potential residents, and potential new businesses. The following objectives should be completed in order to demolish dilapidated structures in Curtis:

- Encourage property owners to demolish vacant, dilapidated structures;
- Investigate government programs that can help with the property improvements and removing vacant, dilapidated structures;
- Set aside funds, annually, for demolition and property clean-up;
- Complete nuisance abatement process;
- Take legal action, when required, for nuisance properties in complete disrepair; and
- Determine a strategy for substandard, unsafe properties that become available for purchase.

## Evaluate Existing & Potential Redevelopment Areas

Curtis has existing Redevelopment Areas which have been identified, assessed, and declared as Blighted and Substandard. Within these areas, multiple Tax Increment Financing (TIF) projects have been successfully completed. However, there are other areas in the community that should be evaluated to determine the redevelopment need. Once potential areas are identified, blight and substandard assessments should be completed to conclude whether these potential redevelopment areas can qualify for TIF. If an area does meet blight and substandard definitions, a form Blight and Substandard Study will be completed to fulfill the preliminary requirements for TIF.

It is imperative to complete the Blight and Substandard Study prior to any redevelopment efforts in order to truly benefit from TIF. TIF can also be used as a development incentive for potential businesses and business expansions; therefore, the City should consider meeting this objective prior to marketing the prime commercial real estate.

One potential area, already discussed by the City, is land located to the east of the existing corporate limits along the Highway 23 and adjacent to the airport. This area has been identified as prime real estate for commercial development; therefore, it would be beneficial for the City to have TIF as a development incentive for business development within this area. The land is not currently a part of the City's corporate limits, so annexation would be a necessary first step. Completing the Blight and Substandard analysis is important for the City if they want to be able to offer TIF as an incentive tool for new commercial development. Because Curtis is classified as a "second-class city" by Nebraska's Statutes, the City can declare up to 50% of its corporate limits as Blighted and Substandard. With this limitation, proper assessments and review of ideal redevelopment areas will be crucial to maximizing this economic development resource. The following objectives should be completed in order to fully evaluate all existing and potential redevelopment areas for Curtis:

- Review and identify underutilized areas within and around the City of Curtis;
- Review and identify areas in need of potential redevelopment, considering:
  - Infrastructure improvements,
  - Private property improvements, and
  - Potential for TIF incentives for commercial development;
- Verify existing redevelopment areas are still in need of additional redevelopment efforts; and
- Establish Redevelopment Plans for the specific redevelopment areas.

## **Develop “Spec” Building for Business Development**

The City of Curtis would like to encourage entrepreneurship amongst its residents. They are planning on constructing a “spec” building that will be available to rent or purchase, depending on the circumstances of the entrepreneur. The City believes it is important to support local businesses whether it is a current Curtis resident or a fellow Nebraskan that has dreamt of starting their own business. By constructing a spec building, the City is willing to invest the initial dollars to give an entrepreneur a place to start. As the business grows this will not only market the community but it can increase employment opportunities for other residents within the region. Economic development for the community was a desired goal by residents and City leaders alike. The following objectives should be completed in order for Curtis to construct a spec building:

- Determine building programming needs for the spec building;
- Determine appropriate location for the spec building and identify the following:
  - The size and layout of the building,
  - Infrastructure needs, and
  - Potential funding sources;
- Being marketing the project to interested parties; and
- Utilize Development/Investment Group to assist with the following:
  - Develop floor plan model, and complete pre-development work,
  - Complete design and bid letting, after notice of award from any submitted grant applications, and
  - Complete construction phase.



## Increase Marketing

Creating a community brand and marketing a brand to existing and potential residents and visitors is important when developing an image. With all Curtis has to offer, a marketing campaign needs to be implemented to showcase land availability for residential and commercial development as well as quality of life with existing amenities. A marketing campaign should advertise to both existing residents and to the outside world. Marketing the City should be an on-going effort made in part by the City of Curtis with the assistance of local organizations and businesses. The idea is to inform local residents, the surrounding area, and visitors passing through, of the wonderful amenities the community has to offer including local businesses, events, job opportunities, and housing market details.

Social media and other internet sources, regional or State-wide visitor's guides or magazines, and marketing brochures and materials are just a few of the ways the community can get increase marketing efforts. Most recently, the City has developed a new website, with updated information. This was a top priority for the City and continually updating information on the website will be instrumental in providing detailed information online for anyone to quickly access. The following objectives should be completed to increase Curtis's marketing efforts:

- Determine ideal market area(s) for marketing outreach;
- Outline branding scheme for City-driven marketing efforts;
- Complete marketing plan which is comprehensive in nature and may include many of the marketing opportunities outlined below;
- Develop online and print marketing materials for various medias (local, regional, and statewide) including the following:
  - Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.),
  - Website,
  - Location One Information Systems (LOIS),
  - Print Materials (Posters, brochures, flyers, etc.),
  - Media (Newspaper, Television, Radio, etc.), and
  - Community Signage (Banners, Gateway Entrance Signs, Wayfinding Signage, etc.);
- Update website and other online marketing sources regularly to ensure information is up-to-date for events and opportunities available in Curtis;
- Create a "shop local" campaign to continuously remind local residents of the importance of supporting local businesses; and
- Outline marketing responsibilities and assign tasks to ensure all efforts are cohesive.

# Mid-Term Goals

The City of Curtis has several mid-term goals that they will work to complete over the next three to five years. Each goal has a list of objectives to complete in order to accomplish the goal. Many of these objectives will be completed by the City, both staff and elected officials; however, not all of the goals and objectives should solely rest on the shoulders of the City. Many other community groups and organizations will need to assist the City in order to see these projects through.

## Promote Infill Development

Infill development, by nature, is less expensive because there is no need to extend public utility services. Infill development utilizes existing public infrastructure, filling in vacant properties with residences and commercial businesses. Promoting infill development can save the City funds by avoiding sprawl and the need to extend public infrastructure to new developments on the outskirts of the community.

Infill lots are scattered throughout the community and vary based on availability, price, zones, dimensions, etc. The City should create an inventory, essentially a database, of lots available for residential and commercial construction. Flyers and maps could also be created to help with marketing efforts. Location, current zoning, dimensions, costs, and ownership of lots should all be included within the flyers and maps to market the lots for new home construction and economic development.

Vacant lots can be an asset for new development and their size, location, and type of adjacent land uses will dictate the type of development qualified for the infill lot. Currently, Curtis has a high demand for rental housing, senior-living options, and quality, affordable homes for purchase. From the question “From your perspective, what do you consider is our greatest or most pressing housing need in Curtis?” in the community survey, 93 percent of respondents expressed a need for affordable/low-income housing both for rent and purchase. They voiced their concern that many of the homes and properties that are available are either priced too high and/or are not suitable for habitants especially elderly residents and large families. Other vacant lots that are in the commercial/industrial areas can be an opportunity for new business development. Infill business development would increase the tax base and local revenue and infill development may be more appealing because the infrastructure already exists which helps lower overall development costs.

Promoting infill development can also encourage creative ways of marketing the land to the residents and the surrounding areas. The City can negotiate deals with the potential investor to encourage them to build their home or business here instead of going somewhere else. Which as mentioned previously any new development can be beneficial to the community in many ways. The following objectives should be completed to promote infill in the City:

- Identify potential infill lots for residential and commercial development;
- Prepare inventory of all infill lots;
- Promote the use of LB840 and TIF to encourage new development;
- Look for any potential grant programs or other assistance programs – such as Low-Income Housing Tax Credits; and
- Market the potential lots, both locally and regionally.

## **Maintain Public Infrastructure**

Maintaining, improving, and expanding public infrastructure is an on-going task. Because of the large expense of many public infrastructure projects, they require proper planning, funding, and most importantly maintenance. Water, sanitary sewer, stormwater drainage, paving, sidewalks, lighting, ADA compliance, etc. are all public infrastructure aspects which businesses and residents rely on the City to support. Updates continuously need to be made in order to provide the best quality of life for all of Curtis's residents. Community support will entrust decision-makers with the tasks of accomplishing these goals in a timely manner; however, funds must be available in order to begin construction on any one of these projects.

The City of Curtis will improve its public infrastructure through several phases of upgrades and improvements made in the next five+ years. Public infrastructure is vital to the community; Curtis wants to ensure its infrastructure and services provide for their current residents while having the ability to allow for growth when needed.

The City's annual budget and Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) will be beneficial planning tools for long-term public infrastructure projects. The CIP will be a way for decision-makers to plan for capital improvement needs for the next six years. Curtis's officials are taking the necessary steps in order to resolve some of the on-going issues with public infrastructure. They have been working with Engineers for assessments and looking into funding options for infrastructure improvements and extensions. The following objectives should be completed to maintain infrastructure in the City:

- Complete CCTV of water and sanitary sewer mains:
  - Utilize results from the CCTV to prioritize infrastructure improvement needs,
  - Consult with City Engineer to help with prioritization needs,
  - Explore potential funding opportunities, and
  - Complete upgrades as funding allows;
- Complete street and sidewalk assessment to determine condition of existing infrastructure and the need for additional sidewalks or pavement:
  - Prioritize street and sidewalk improvement needs based on assessment,
  - Continue reviewing and updating 1 & 6 Year Road Plan on an annual basis,
  - Consult with City Engineer to help with prioritization needs,
  - Explore potential funding opportunities, and
  - Complete upgrades as funding allows;
- Continually assess other public infrastructure needs;
- Utilize the Capital Improvement Plan as a planning tool to help the City budget for project needs; and
- Complete regular maintenance to help protect the integrity and lifespan of the City's infrastructure.

## Target Prime Commercial Property

The City should work to target areas of land for prime commercial development. This land should have access to the larger transportation network including Highway 23 and the railroad. Visibility and land availability are important aspects for commercial business ventures; therefore, they should also be important factors when locating prime commercial and light industrial real estate. This land should be close to the existing corporate limits and public infrastructure and adjacent to existing commercial and/or light industrial businesses. Once areas have been targeted for commercial development, the pros and cons of allowing other types of development on the property should be heavily evaluated in order to prevent unnecessary development sprawl.

One area that has already been identified by the City and MVEDC is an abandoned property close to the railroad. This site would be an ideal area for new commercial development; however, the area was previously used as a battery dumpsite. Due to the prior use of the land, this site is environmentally hazardous and would need mitigated before new development can take place. Without proper mitigation, this site could become potentially dangerous to the surrounding areas, therefore mitigation efforts should be completed regardless of new development. Potential funding sources through a brownfield redevelopment grant would help clean the site so it can become a useful property to the community.

Another possible area already identified by the City is along Highway 23 near the airport. This land is prime real-estate market since it is along the highway and close to the airport. The flat terrain for this site is ideal for commercial development, as opposed to the rolling hills which surrounds the majority of Curtis. Currently, this site sits outside of the corporate limits; therefore, annexation should be considered. Having commercial property within the corporate limits is important to help expand the tax base for the City as well as to be able to offer certain development incentives such as Tax Increment Financing to the potential businesses.

These areas, along with any other properties that may be identified for prime commercial development should be marketed. The following objectives should be completed to target prime commercial property in the City:

- Identify areas of land which would be ideal for commercial development;
- Determine if a brownfield redevelopment grant is suitable for the old railroad property;
- Consider annexation of prime commercial real estate that is located adjacent to, but outside of, the City's corporate limits:
  - Determine potential annexation boundaries,
  - Work with Legal Counsel and Registered Land Surveyor to begin annexation process,
  - Create infrastructure plan for annexed areas,
  - Determine if newly annexed areas are potential redevelopment areas, and
  - Market potential commercial properties;
- Develop shovel-ready site(s) for new commercial development; and
- Continually identify additional prime commercial sites, as new development progresses.

## Additional Project Notes