
THE CITY *of Altoona*

2024 Strategic Planning Session Report

Introduction

On Thursday, October 3, 2024, Altoona City Administrator Mike Golat facilitated a strategic planning session with the Altoona City Council and City Leadership Team.

The agenda included four general sections:

- Overview of strategic planning.
- Review of missions, values, vision.
- Review of previous SWOT Analysis.
- Focus on strategic planning goals.

The following ground rules for the retreat were established:

- Everyone's opinion counts.
- Disagreements are addressed constructively.
- Sharing of ideas is what is important—everyone was encouraged to chime in.

The 2024 Strategic Planning Session was aimed at aligning the city's goals with new developments and opportunities that have emerged since 2021. This review was critical to ensure that Altoona's strategic vision continues to adapt to changing economic, technological, and societal dynamics, including addressing the housing crisis and leveraging new federal funding opportunities.

A key focus of this year's session was integrating new priorities, such as the embrace of artificial intelligence (AI) and technology to improve city services and efficiency. Additionally, the City Council emphasized the need to address the growing housing crisis with innovative policies and community engagement strategies, taking advantage of the affordable housing fund that will be established with the closure of TID #3.

Overview of Strategic Planning Process

The facilitators provided participants with an overview of strategic planning and its importance. Strategic planning is a vital tool for local jurisdictions to ensure that the priorities set by the City Council are conveyed in the organization's goals, that strategies are clearly developed to meet the goals, and that overall city government is accountable to meeting community needs.

Strategic plans define measurable checkpoints to see if we've been successful in achieving our goals and drive the development of the budget, work plan, policies, ordinances, and administrative processes that contribute to development of the City comprehensive plan. Strategic Plans are a tool to help us focus on our goals, define who we are, define who we serve and assess where we are.

Challenges with creating and managing a Strategic Plan include:

- A City's mission is not well-defined like a business (many competing stakeholders).
- It takes time and effort.
- Getting and keeping buy-in.
- Shifting priorities.
- Ability to achieve goals (scarce resources).
- Defining best ways to measure success.
- Mandates.

What is to gain by establishing a Strategic Plan?

- Creating energy around things we want to accomplish.
- A document to show people (accountability).
- Provides for more efficient use of our time and resources.
- Facilitates team building.
- Provides a tool for buy-in from staff and constituents.
- Creates proactive rather than reactive behavior/management.

The following considered starting points for a Strategic Plan:

- Inventory of City’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
- Mission—Why do we exist?
- Values—What do we value as an organization and community?
- Vision—Where do we want to be in 5 years, 10 years?

The 2024 session introduced a critical focus on proactively leveraging new grant opportunities, especially federal funding, to support key infrastructure and community projects.

Review of SWOT Analysis

The facilitators then led participants through a review of the 2021 strategic planning SWOT analysis, which identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for the City of Altoona, both organizationally and in the community. Overall values and strategic priorities were established from the SWOT analysis.

Below is an inventory of the identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Identified Strengths

The location and accessibility of the River Prairie Development draws visitors from near and far	Altoona has many excellent Parks, Trails and Open Spaces
Community members are generally supportive of City Government initiatives	Altoona’s School System is strong and has been recognized for its excellence
The City is the right size – small enough but large enough, and listens to public input	The City is committed to affordable housing
Altoona is a safe community	The City has a strong community engagement program including an excellent social media presence
Altoona has good leadership on staff and on Council and focuses on employee development	The City works well with our regional partners
The City is fiscally responsible	The City is committed to thoughtful / sustainable growth

Identified Weaknesses

The City is deficient in IT Staff	It is difficult, given financial constraints, to add enough staff to keep up with growth
There exists a lack of participation by the public in many City issues and actions	Growth and development may detract from small town feel
The City struggles to keep up with infrastructure needs – capital projects	State aids to City’s have not kept pace with need and rising costs – levy/shared revenue

The City does not have a single source of communication for community events– Community Calendar	There is a lack of retail/ fast food establishments in Altoona
The City is physically disconnected geographically/ railroad / HWY 53 / Lake	The community has not decided on the optimal mix of rental VS. owner (63%) right
The City needs to expand bus routes to better serve its residents	Free & reduced lunch numbers indicate significant level of poverty

Identified Opportunities

Expansion of broadband	Affordable Housing Fund / Affordable Housing Plan (TID Money)
Passenger rail?	Strengthened ties to elected officials
Annexation	Library – make more people aware/promote
Outdoor recreation – growth/winter activities	School partnerships / co-op
Partnerships with organizations / recreational opportunities	Additional federal funding?
Grant opportunities	

Identified Threats

Sewage treatment rates	Staffing challenges
Inflation	Political environment – anti-growth sentiment
Climate change and impact on storm water management	Bid climate – capacity (this may change with new federal administration)
Lake Altoona water quality	COVID or other diseases
Ground water quality	Challenges communicating effectively with all citizens due to generational differences
Disruptive technology	Cyber security
Housing costs & prices	Reduction in federal funding?

UPDATES:

2024 has brought new opportunities for Altoona, particularly in embracing technological advancements like artificial intelligence (AI) and strategically maximizing grant funding opportunities. These areas present new ways for the city to improve its service delivery and secure financial stability.

An emerging threat identified in 2024 is the pressure on school capacity due to increasing development. This highlights the need to continue to work closely with school administration as new developments are proposed.

Review of Missions, Values and Vision

The facilitators then led participants through a review of the Mission, Values and Vision of the Organization and the City Council.

The identified core mission of the City is to:

- Protect public health and safety.
- Protect the human and natural environment.
- Facilitate commerce.
- Build and maintain infrastructure.
- Promote cultural and recreational opportunities.

City Mission Statement: To provide RockStar service to Altoona’s citizens while continuously improving their community.

Participants identified the following as the core mission of the City Council:

- Policy Body.
- Fiscal Stewards.
- Representatives of the Community.
- Promoting Goals of the City.
- Establish Plans.

City Council Mission Statement: Entrusted by our citizens to pass effective legislation, represent the city’s best interests in all matters, establish strategic goals and set policy based on community values.

Core Values

Next, the facilitators led participants through a review of established core values. This exercise led to several new core values in response to various existing factors (economy, technological advancement, etc.)

The following Core Values for the City of Altoona were reviewed (tallies for the 2021 strategic planning dot exercise are included):

- Effective, transparent communications in every aspect of operations and being good stewards of the City’s finances. (13)
- A well-trained, professional workforce that provides excellent customer service to Altoona’s residents. (12)
- The City’s duty to care for our assets including buildings, streets, utilities, parks, rolling stock and equipment and pursue this duty diligently. (12)
- Safe neighborhoods for all Altoona residents and excellent response from Altoona’s public safety professionals. (11)
- Altoona’s children and the importance of providing quality education to all of Altoona’s youth. (10)
- Thoughtfully planned, sustainable and resilient, residential, and business development. (10)
- Collaborative, team-based, decision making that includes residents, Council members and staff. (7)
- Being open, honest and ethical in dealing with each other, the Public and our cohorts. (5)
- Practical, evidence-based, decision making. (3)
- Investing in amenities and events to enhance the quality of life of Altoona’s residents and visitors. (3)
- A welcoming community for all and a culture of kindness. (2)
- Local and regional partnerships, with businesses, non-profits and other governmental agencies. (2)
- Innovation, creativity, and continuous improvement (2)
- Community strength, health, and sustainability (2)
- Altoona’s rich history. (1)
- Access to all forms of art to enhance the quality of life of Altoona’s residents. (1)
- The City’s natural assets and resources. (0)

Altoona's Top Identified Core Values in 2021

1. Effective, transparent communications in every aspect of operations and being good stewards of the City's finances.
2. The City's duty to care for our assets including buildings, streets, utilities, parks, rolling stock and equipment and pursue this duty diligently
3. A well-trained, professional workforce that provides excellent customer service to Altoona's residents.
4. Safe neighborhoods for all Altoona residents and excellent response from Altoona's public safety professionals.
5. Thoughtfully planned, sustainable and resilient, residential, and business development.
6. Altoona's children and the importance of providing quality education to all of Altoona's youth.

Top newly identified emergent core values:

- Strategic focus on proactively leveraging grant opportunities to enhance the city's financial sustainability.
- Embracing artificial intelligence and technological advancements to improve operational efficiency and innovation.
- Continued engagement with the community to address the housing crisis and promote housing equity.
- Optimizing resource allocation in response to economic challenges.
- Continuing to integrate school capacity into planning for growth and development.
- Thoughtfully planning the East Neighborhood and city-owned land for sustainable community development.

City Vision

The facilitators then led participants through a review of Altoona's community vision statement which was established in the 2022 Comprehensive Plan. No changes to the vision statement were made.

"The City of Altoona will be an inclusive, diverse, sustainable, progressive, innovative, and equitable community that features a high quality of life, a family-friendly and welcoming atmosphere, excellent natural resources and recreational opportunities, local and regional destinations and attractions, and a mix of housing, shopping, and employment opportunities for its residents and visitors alike. Building on its regional location and proximity to the greater Chippewa Valley, Altoona will continue to balance growth and natural resource protection to increase climate resiliency, deliver sustainable public infrastructure, provide high-quality educational opportunities, offer affordable, diverse, and inclusive housing options, and work collaboratively with regional partners to advance shared goals."

Top City of Altoona Strategic Priorities

After the core values exercise, the facilitators led another dot exercise to further define the top strategic priorities of the City.

When it comes to Strategic Planning Goals and Objectives, it is important to note that:

- Goals are broad; objectives are narrow.
- Goals are general intentions; objectives are precise.
- Goals are intangible; objectives are tangible.
- Goals can't be validated as is; objectives can be validated as is.

- Goals are long-term; objectives are short term.

The following were identified as the top Strategic Priorities for the City of Altoona (tallies for the 2021 strategic planning dot exercise are included):

- **Repair and replace aging infrastructure. (15)**
- **Hire additional personnel to keep pace with growth. (14)**
- **Assure Financial "House is in Order" (Long Range Fiscal Plan; TIDs, Bonding, staffing plan, tax implications). (12)**
- **Identify the next opportunity for economic growth and implementing an economic development plan. (10)**
- **Implement Space Needs Program for City Facilities. (9)**
- **Focus on staff development and accountability to foster a high-performing work environment (evaluation system, pay-for-performance, etc.) (6)**
- **Invest in quality-of-life amenities and opportunities. (5)**
- **Develop and implement a Housing Plan. (5)**
- **Evaluate technological needs and implementing solutions as identified. (4)**
- **Improve Public Outreach and City communications (surveys, public engagement, social media strategy). (4)**
- **Focus Efforts on Long Range Planning with an emphasis on planning for specific places or spaces (3)**
- **Establish sustainability priorities and opportunities. (3)**
- **Establish organizational equity, diversity, and inclusion priorities and goals. (2)**
- **Implement an active Forestry program (Emerald Ash Borer, street trees, oak wilt, etc.) (2)**
- **Maximize Cooperation with other agencies and private entities. (1)**
- **Activate and program Altoona City Parks. (0)**

Altoona's Top Strategic Priorities

- 1. Hire additional personnel to keep pace with growth. (Swapped with #2)**
- 2. Repair and replace aging infrastructure.**
- 3. Assure Financial "House is in Order" (Long Range Fiscal Plan; TIDs, Bonding, staffing plan, tax implications).**
- 4. Identify the next opportunity for economic growth and implementing an economic development plan.**
- 5. Implement Space Needs Program for City Facilities.**

Newly added strategic priorities:

- 1. Maximize Grant Procurement and Funding Opportunities: Develop and implement a proactive strategy to identify and pursue unprecedented grant opportunities, ensuring financial sustainability for key city projects.**
- 2. Leverage Artificial Intelligence in City Operations: Embrace AI to enhance city operations, decision-making, and service delivery.**
- 3. Establish an Affordable Housing Fund Program: Continue to engage the community and innovate policies to expand affordable housing options and increase availability.**
- 4. Thoughtfully Develop the East Neighborhood: Plan and develop the city-owned 80-acre property to create a sustainable, vibrant community area.**

Conclusion

The City's implementation of the strategic plan will span over the next several years. Ensuring the strategic plan's alignment with the City's budget process, capital improvement plan, important policy decisions, economic development initiatives and public safety priorities will all be key measures of success.