

## City of Merrill, Wisconsin

### Strategic Planning Report

Session #1

Meeting facilitated and report developed by  
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January 23, 2014

#### Introduction

Twenty-eight City of Merrill stakeholders including interested citizens, the mayor, council members, the city administrator, and department heads attended the first strategic planning session in the city's recent history. The session consisted of a presentation delivered by Art Lersch, UW-Extension project facilitator. Topics included local trends, strategic planning in general, the proposed planning process for this project, and information on creating visions for city government and the community it serves. The presentation helped set the stage for deep discussions about the future of city government and the city itself that evening and likely beyond.

The presentation also conveyed information about setting overarching goals and parameters that provide guidance to department heads, form a basis for discussions about what services the city should provide and how they should be provided, and create a foundation that will help establish an environment in which meaningful and productive budget related discussions can take place for many years to come.

#### Expectations

An important part of many strategic planning projects is determining and recording the expectations of planning group members as well as what they think others outside the group want to see come from the process. When asked "**As someone who serves and lives in the City of Merrill, what are your expectations for this project?**" those in attendance responded in the following manner.

- Provide direction so that city departments are working to achieve the most important overarching goals set by this process ("everyone on same page").
- Create a plan that will move the city forward.
- Establish ways to develop a more streamlined, efficient government.

- Achieve consensus on all the points mentioned during this discussion.
- Help restore community trust.
- Identify opportunities.
- Discover and define Merrill city government and the community's identity.
- Engage in an inclusive process.
- Develop more focused energy.
- Work as a cohesive group. Help make certain that the pieces of the puzzle in city government are working together to achieve common goals.
- Educate citizens about what services are being provided and how.
- Help determine what the community should look like.
- Public to provides input (special projects like this one usually attract more interest).
- More listening to our aging residents.

Next, the group was asked to respond to the question **“What do you think the public and other stakeholders (e.g. other residents, county government, nonprofit organizations, etc.) would like to see come out of this project?** Individual responses were as follows:

- A clean city.
- Better services; more efficiency and effectiveness.
- No duplication of services.
- Keep costs down as much as possible. Provide services for less cost when possible.
- Promote the good school system that is here.
- Share services with other governments and internally when possible.
- Grow the community.

- Have openness in government. Make the public feel involved.
- A more vibrant and attractive community, especially to youth.

### **Visioning Exercises**

To begin the strategic planning process, those in attendance discussed the differences between vision and mission statements, neither of which currently exist for the Merrill city government or the community it serves. Following this conversation, group members answered “**What is the definition of ‘success’ as it relates to City of Merrill government?**” The answers provided below constitute Merrill city government’s primary core values.

- Responsive to citizens’ needs in a responsible manner.
- Customer satisfaction (expectations met in a competent and timely manner)
- Providing the greatest good for the most residents as possible.
- A government that is easy to do business with.
- Adaptable.
- Provides consistent and the highest level of quality service.
- Fairness (consistent, equal treatment of citizens).
- Progress.
- Active listening (to one another, to residents, to city employees, etc.).
- We interact well together.
- Say we sometimes lack the capacity to provide all the services that people request).
- Safety.
- Positive outlook. (For both the government and the community).
- Trust.

Those in attendance were then asked **“What can and should this city government do to ensure its success well into the future?”** The responses were as follows.

- Create trust that services will be provided, consistent, and constant.
- Provide listening/town hall sessions.
- Educate citizens about how a committee-based government works (i.e. important discussions take place and important decisions are often made at the committee level).
- Find ways to keep younger folks in town or bring them back after college. (What is needed?).
- Resourcefulness and adaptability.
- Attract and retain skill levels needed for the future.
- Treat current and future government employees as an asset.

Lastly, those in attendance including the public were encouraged to respond to the following scenario. **“If journalists throughout the country were going to write a feature story about Merrill or Merrill city government 10 years from now, what would be the most positive headlines/points?”** Besides the answers in the table below, planning group members were encouraged to email additional ideas to Art Lersch at [Arthur.lersch@ces.uwex.edu](mailto:Arthur.lersch@ces.uwex.edu). (They may also contact him via phone at 715-539-1075.) Any answers that come in via email or phone will be placed in a document separate from this report and handed out during the February 13 planning session.

<b>Merrill Community</b>	<b>Merrill City Government</b>
<i>Merrill Unemployment at All-Time Low</i>	<i>Merrill City Department Heads each Secure \$1 million in Grants in Support of City Services</i>
<i>0% Unemployment in Merrill</i>	<i>City of Merrill has Lowest Taxes in the Area</i>
<i>No Status Quo in Merrill</i>	<i>Merrill Government Continues Forward with Vision that was Created 10 Years Ago</i>
<i>Merrill Totally Eliminates Blight and Collapsing Properties</i>	

<i>Merrill: A Top 10 American City</i>	
<i>Merrill Experiences 100% of Growth after 50 Years of Stagnation</i>	

**Parking Lot**

A “parking lot” was developed to place ideas into that for now fell on the peripheries of the discussions that took place during this particular meeting. Planning group members are encouraged to bring the items up at more appropriate times during the discussion. Items will be added to the list throughout the strategic planning process. Several of them have the potential of becoming action items in the strategic plan.

- Research Merrill mill rates/property taxes collected over time in comparison to other similar cities (based on population).
- Explore possibility of publishing government committee meeting minutes on the city website, on the local cable TV station, etc. (communicate more widely).
- Hold town hall type meetings.
- Perhaps do local study that will reveal just how many youth are leaving the area after high school graduation, why they are leaving, and whether they will consider coming back (or actually have come back).
- Tie strategic planning to discussions about how city government can help cultivate and mentor community leaders.

The following thought was provided by an individual who could not attend the meeting.

- Relating to industrial development: Do we know what skills unemployed citizens have? Having employees with certain skills is always important when considering what businesses to recruit and which to help start.

**Next Meetings**

The next four meetings were scheduled for the following dates and times. It was agreed that all the meetings will be held in Council Chambers unless informed otherwise. All meetings will be of the Committee of the Whole and posted according to Wisconsin open meetings law.

- Thursday, February 13, 2014, 5:30-7:30 p.m.

- Thursday, March 6, 2014, 5:30-7:30 p.m.
- Thursday, March 27, 2014, 5:30-7:30 p.m.
- Thursday, April 17, 2014, 5:30-7:30 p.m.

During the February 13 meeting, planning group members will develop draft vision statements (for city government and community) based on the work completed January 23. Attempts will be made to reconcile the statements into forms acceptable to the vast majority of the members in the group. If there is time, the group will begin the SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results) analysis.