

Strategic Planning Report

Session #5

Meeting facilitated and report developed by
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Introduction

Twenty-two City of Merrill stakeholders including interested citizens, the mayor, council members, the city administrator, and department heads attended the fifth city government strategic planning session. The session was facilitated by Art Lersch, UW-Extension, Lincoln County. During the meeting, the group continued discussing the most crucial strategic issues that city government will likely have to address in the next several years.

Any Additions or Changes to the Session #4 Report?

No additions or changes were requested.

Continue Strategic Issue Identification

After a review of the issues identified during the last meeting, those in attendance were asked to continue the discussion based on the following questions.

- a. What are the most important issues facing city government over the next five years?
- b. What is the capacity of city government to address those issues? (If the capacity is not present, how can it be acquired? Or, is this something city government can do anything about in the first place?)

Identified issues were:

- City government workforce recruitment and retention. (How can we offer competitive compensation? What other incentives can be offered to hire and keep high quality employees?)
- Develop Route 51 corridor and County G area. Foster dialogue with townships in order to get this done. Consider developing northward up County K. Prioritize development

by choosing areas that have the best potential return on investment (best bank for the buck.)

- Finding ways to maintain and improve the city's aging infrastructure. Where/how can the funds be acquired? - This may also be tied to tax base issues.- Break down components of this in order to prioritize what is most needed. (Some infrastructural projects are being mandated by the state. These and others based strictly on deterioration issues are time sensitive). Decide which of these projects can be "piggybacked" (e.g. upgrade sewer system and then fix the roads in that area, etc.)
- Eliminate blight.
- Dealing with increased, more pervasive drug use in and around the city.
- Strengthening fire prevention. This could help reduce blight and benefit economic development.
- Our aging population.

Strategic Issue Prioritization

Although more strategic issues may be identified, participants were asked to next begin thinking about which issues already mentioned are the most important for city government to address in the coming years. They were asked to do so also based on the following:

- a. What is urgent and important? (What is the difference between urgency and importance?)
- b. What is not urgent and important? (Issues that city government has time to plan how to address)
- c. Can progress toward addressing the strategic issue be measured? (How can progress that is made be communicated to city government internal stakeholders and the public?)

Faced with a declining and aging population, the vast majority of stakeholders in the room focused on the strategic issue **"How can Merrill city government help grow the city's tax base?"** It was agreed that the potential strategies listed on the next page are not mutually exclusive, meaning that if one strategy is carried out, that could help to further another.

Elements, or more accurately potential strategies that were mentioned to help answer this particular question were:

- € Make it easier for people to start or expand a business within the city. Too often, city government regulations are obstacles to business development. City officials/employees need to do a better job of helping potential and current business owners find options that will still allow them to comply with regulations while helping them establish or expand their enterprises. We need to say “yes” much more often than “no.” We need to become business friendly.
 - € Find ways to promote job creation and diversity. (Note: For this and the strategy listed above, it was agreed that it will be important to maintain city funding for Lincoln County Economic Development Corporation.)
 - € Redevelop dilapidated housing sections especially in downtown areas and develop new housing where it makes the most sense. Nearly 65% of the city’s total equalized value is derived from residential property. Great strides are currently being made to improve the overall quality of the city housing stock, but much more must be done to ensure that homes for sale are quickly sold and houses throughout every ward are well maintained. Perhaps approach the county once again to request that it tighten up its foreclosure process (stick to three rather than five year + timeline). Some participants questioned what else could be done.
 - € Economic development. When we tear down the old, make certain that we replace it with something better. Becoming even more aggressive on eliminating blight will be key to good economic development. Prioritizing projects based on their potential for a solid return on investment will also be vital.
 - € Attract young families to the area by creating jobs and improving the city’s “quality of life” amenities. It was acknowledged that attracting young families will also serve to slow population decline (between 2000 and 2010, the city’s population declined nearly 5%). In theory, attracting young families will also help slow aging population trends.
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A second strategic issue that the group focused on was **“What must Merrill city government do to ensure that city infrastructure is maintained, replaced, and/or expanded when warranted?”**

Comments were made that plans have already been developed for many of these projects. However, for many funding has not yet been secured. As stated earlier under the “Continue Strategic Issues Identification” section, it was proposed that some kind of prioritization process take place based on timelines (e.g. What projects have timelines versus which ones do not? Which are coming up first?, etc.), and ability to fund (through grants, special assessments, tax increases, bonding, etc.).

Currently, the state allows local governments to raise property taxes only by the percent increase in net new construction from one year to the next. If there was no net new construction, then the levy limit is 0%. The levy limit can be exceeded if a public referendum requesting an increase is passed and then approved by city council. (Source: League of Wisconsin Municipalities).

More specific strategies will have to be determined if this strategic issue is to remain one of the most important for city government to address in the coming years.

Lastly, there was more discussion on the strategic issue **“How do we better educate the public and city employees about how city government works and the positive things it is doing?”**

This particular issue was discussed a great deal early in the planning process. During this meeting, emphasis was placed upon telling citizens about the current realities of providing services. Debate took place on whether it is within Merrill city government’s “circle of influence” to even attempt to deliver such education. Consensus seemed to form around the notion that in a democracy it is vital for government to at least attempt to provide information about how it does business. Stronger consensus formed around the notion of making a more concerted effort to communicate the outcomes and impacts of city government programs and projects. More discussion about this issue will need to take place in order to decide whether it should become a priority that city government devotes substantial resources to in the coming years.

Next Meetings

The next planning meetings were scheduled for May 29, June 19, and July 17. All will begin at 5:30 p.m. and will be held in City Council Chambers.