

## **Strategic Planning Report**

Session #6

Meeting facilitated and report developed by  
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May 29, 2014

### **Introduction**

Twenty-one City of Merrill stakeholders including interested citizens, the mayor, council members, the city administrator, and department heads attended the sixth city government strategic planning session. The session was facilitated by Art Lersch, UW-Extension, Lincoln County. During the meeting, the group more clearly defined proposed strategic issues and determined which are the most important for city government to pursue (see page 3 of this report for the prioritized list).

### **Continue Strategic Issue Identification**

Before prioritizing the issues, the group discussed the meaning of each of them. Below is a summary of those deliberations.

- € Are there any services that we need to provide that we currently are not? Are there services that we may not be able to provide any longer or should not be offering? Those in attendance agreed that the meaning of these questions is straightforward.
- € What is Merrill city government's budget philosophy? Several in attendance indicated that such a philosophy should be multi-tiered, meaning that it must include plans for contingency savings, borrowing provisions, prioritizing expenditures, guidelines for carrying over funds from one year to the next, etc. Comments were made about how department heads spend down their budgets at the end of the year because what is left over isn't transferred into their next year's budget. In essence, they are penalized for being efficient managers. In general, it was agreed that the budget philosophy should be applied on a consistent basis over time. In part, a clearly stated budget philosophy may have to begin by modifying some existing city budget policies.
- € How can Merrill city government help to better engage the public and organizations in projects that will enhance quality of life? and How can city government help foster a cultural change within Merrill where its citizens become more trusting of city

government? It was agreed that these two issues should be combined, and the language of the second one be modified. The new version is reflected above. The strategic issue then became How can city government better inform and educate internal and external stakeholders in the most transparent way possible about the positive things it is facilitating, some of the challenges it is facing, and how it functions? Potential action items to address the issue if it was to be chosen as a priority were periodically publishing a list of city government accomplishments in local papers, holding town hall meetings to discuss issues and communicate city government successes, having the mayor provide a “state of the city” address annually, arranging for MP3 to tape more city meetings, and continuing to improve the city website.

- € How can city government facilitate partnerships with entities that are working to address regional issues? To help clarify the issue, the development of the Central Wisconsin Medical School project and finding skilled labor for this region were provided as examples.
- € What more can city government do to recruit and retain skilled, dedicated employees? The group decided that although recruiting and retaining quality city government employees is important, it is not one that rises to the level of being a high level priority issue at this time. It was also recognized that an aging workforce and increasing retirements may elevate the status of this particular issue in the very near future.
- € How does city government create and implement strategic economic development (and redevelopment)? Those in attendance discouraged the idea of prioritizing economic development projects until all factors are taken into consideration. Part of addressing this strategic issue will be creating and then ranking a list of projects based on a number of criteria. They also indicated that the city needs to continue its work to become even more nimble when economic development opportunities that perhaps were unforeseen arise. It was noted that the city’s Redevelopment Authority will play an important role in addressing this issue if it is chosen as a priority.
- € What can city government do to maintain and improve the city’s aging infrastructure? Everyone agreed that the meaning of this issue is straightforward.

(Note: The important issues of reducing blight and dealing with the area’s rapidly aging population are directly tied to the strategic issue of strengthening the city’s tax base, the one that was identified during the last planning session as being the most important to address in the coming years.)

Both the issues strengthening fire prevention and dealing with increased, more pervasive drug use in and around the city were deemed important but too narrowly focused to be considered primary strategic issues for the entire city government to address. They can be better addressed at the department level.

### **Prioritization of Strategic Issues**

The group use a voting process to decide which issues city government should focus its efforts on in the coming years. Each attendee was given three votes, understanding that **“How can Merrill city government help grow the city’s tax base?”** had already been chosen by consensus as the most vital issue to address. The goal was to choose no more than three additional strategic issues, recognizing that city government has limited capacity to address many issues at the same time. The number of votes is included at the end of each of the six remaining issues that were considered.

1. **“How can Merrill city government help grow the city’s tax base?”** (consensus choice)
2. **“Are there any services that we need to provide that we currently are not? Are there services that we may not be able to provide any longer or should not be offering?”** (15 votes)
3. **“What is Merrill city government’s budget philosophy?”** (14 votes)
4. **“How does city government create and implement strategic economic development (and redevelopment)?”** ( 12 votes)

#### *Others:*

- **“What can city government do to maintain and improve the city’s aging infrastructure?”** (8 votes)
- **“How can city government facilitate partnerships with entities that are working to address regional issues?”** (5 votes)
- **“How can city government better inform and educate internal and external stakeholders in the most transparent way possible about the positive things it is facilitating, some of the challenges it is facing, and how it functions?”** (5 votes)

It was agreed that all these “other” issues will be addressed at some level, but will not be areas where city government focuses most of its efforts in the coming years.

### **Next Steps in the Planning Process**

The final two planning sessions will be devoted to identifying the actions that need to take place to adequately address the issues, determining timelines, and choosing responsible parties. When considering responsible parties, planning group members are asked to think about how citizens may become involved and which individual city departments can do the most to address the issues.

### **Next Meetings**

The remaining meetings are scheduled for June 19 and July 17, 5:30 – 7:30 p.m. Both will be held in City Council Chambers.