

SUMMARY OF DECATUR CITY COUNCIL 2019 STRATEGIC PLANNING RETREAT AND NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION INITIATIVES

Results from the City Council's May 13th and June 24th Neighborhood Revitalization study sessions, and its June 21 strategic planning retreat, are combined here into one summary document. The Neighborhood Revitalization meetings are summarized by Priority Goal #1, beginning on the next page. The following six priority goals were developed during the strategic planning retreat. Taken together, these seven priority goals reflect the Decatur City Council's overall strategic direction for the 2019-2021 period. While the services of municipal government are diverse and complicated, and include many more activities than those covered here, by articulating these seven priority goals, the governing body of the city announces where and how it will focus its greatest attention and effort during the next two years—when the document will be updated for the next two-year period. To the greatest extent possible, the proposed FY 2020 city budget has been prepared using this document as a guide.

PRIORITY GOAL #1: NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION

PRIORITY GOAL #2: GROW, ENHANCE AND BETTER PREPARE THE LOCAL WORKFORCE TO MEET CURRENT & FUTURE DEMANDS

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PRIORITY GOAL #6: COLLABORATE WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS SO THAT THE MANAGEMENT OF LAKE DECATUR, AND ADJOINING PUBLIC OPEN SPACES, IS INTEGRATED INTO A COORDINATED PLAN

PRIORITY GOAL #7: CREATE A BOLD AND ASPIRATIONAL VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF DECATUR AND LINK SHORTER TERM GOALS TO THAT VISION TO ENSURE IT IS UNTIMATELY REALIZED

PRIORITY GOAL #1: NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION

Summary of Goal #1: A community is a collection of neighborhoods and districts, woven around its commercial and industrial uses. But a community is more than the sum of its parts. Different elements of a city must work together holistically to make the city vibrant. If key parts of the city—like some of its older neighborhoods—are not functioning well, the entire city suffers. Many of Decatur’s urban core neighborhoods now require more than just a “make-over.” They need to be remade into residential and commercial destinations people want to live in, transact business in, and where a new lifestyle can be created that transforms these neighborhoods into the focus of Decatur’s revival.

Discussion. Some of Decatur’s older neighborhoods have fallen into differing states of decline. In some instances, what were once attractive and well-maintained, mostly owner-occupied, neighborhoods are now experiencing urban blight. A significant number of properties in blighted urban core neighborhoods have transitioned to rentals, and in too many instances landlords do not make investments in their properties adequate for long-term maintenance. In some neighborhoods, the number of vacant and uninhabitable houses has become alarming. Population decline and an exodus of commercial activity from key neighborhoods are obvious contributing factors. Without intervention, many of these neighborhoods will continue to decline. The appropriate interventions will differ from neighborhood to neighborhood. A funding summary for 2020 is below.

The Decatur City Council is committed to making the necessary interventions, and its number one policy goal is to implement strategies that will change the trajectory of its urban core neighborhoods so that they can again become assets to the community—adding to the vibrancy of the city. In May and June of 2019, the Decatur City Council conducted two study sessions devoted exclusively to neighborhood revitalization. These sessions were a culmination of more than a year of public meetings and analysis of the statistical data that explains how many of Decatur’s older neighborhoods became distressed. The resulting “roadmap” has created a framework for City Council action to span the next several years of nearly 3-dozen strategies. The strategies are in four groups:

1. Repurposing land and land uses, and deploying robust code enforcement
2. Deploying new technologies and upgrading infrastructure in target areas
3. Incentivizing people to remain in the urban core, or move there, by improving access to various services
4. Be more effective at leveraging private investment in the urban core

Success will be measured by improvements in neighborhood equalized assessed values, increases in homeownership, more properties in the urban core used productively, decreases in crime, improvements in the condition of existing housing stocks, and changes in total population by census tract. Neighborhood Revitalization is a complicated undertaking because no single strategy will turn the tide. The demolition of derelict structures is essential; but it must be followed by new or

renewed land uses to replace what is removed. Code enforcement is an important strategy to prevent housing decay; but it needs to accompany new job training so residents can afford to maintain their property, and with changes in community perceptions so that faith and confidence in renewed neighborhoods also occurs.

Strategies. Short-term and long-term strategies discussed by the City Council are summarized below, and grouped by the four general categories listed above. The strategies reflect the City Council's belief that the community should begin by focusing on target areas adjacent to the central business district and then "grow-out" the revitalization, land and building repurposing, rehabilitation and renewal from the core. They also reflect the City Council's overarching view that blighted neighborhoods cannot be simply beautified and cleaned-up; in many cases they must be repurposed and given new anchors, new commercial destinations and occasionally new identities. The City Council believes this requires an incredible amount of intergovernmental cooperation, coordination and public-private partnerships (city, county, school district, township, special purpose districts, philanthropy, local businesses and others) to attract and retain residents.

1. Repurposing land, and land uses
 - a. Increase the rate of building demolition
 - b. Create or join a land bank to sell and develop vacant properties
 - c. Accumulate land under city-ownership for new development
 - d. Create new/enhanced neighborhood anchors & destinations
 - e. Step-up code enforcement and inspect troubled rental properties
 - f. Recruit more private investment by streamlining and simplifying codes, easing side lot transfer & creating targeted incentives for the urban core
2. Deploying new technologies and upgrading infrastructure in target areas
 - a. Expand broadband fiber network in the urban core
 - b. Set aside portions of annual infrastructure budgets for new sidewalks, street lighting and roads in the urban core
 - c. Include space on a new "Decatur App" allowing citizens to record videos that could help law enforcement
 - d. Greater use of technology to aid public safety (police data analytics, surveillance cameras in urban core, body cams, etc.)
3. Incentivizing people to remain in the urban core, or move there, by improving access to various services
 - a. Work with the school district/library to improve educational access and urban core workforce training/retraining programs
 - b. Improve access to odd-time public transit routes to help job retention
 - c. Expand access to low/moderate income health facilities
 - d. Expand access to low/moderate income In-fill housing
 - e. Use targeted tax freezes or abatements; & repurpose DCFC, CICD, etc.
 - f. Take the lead in opening a small business incubator in the target zone
4. Be more effective at leveraging private investment in the urban core
 - a. Block-by-Block Program; privately fund homestead programs
 - b. Recruitment of workers to the urban core with incentives, easier loans and redevelopment of whole blocks selectively cleared and prepared
 - c. College debt repayment incentives to retain talent in Decatur
 - d. Fund retail/hotel/housing studies to encourage investment
 - e. Use an OZ advisor to help recruit investors to eligible projects

PRIORITY GOAL #2: GROW, ENHANCE AND BETTER PREPARE THE LOCAL WORKFORCE TO MEET CURRENT & FUTURE DEMANDS

Summary of Goal #2: There is an urgent need to develop a more effective approach to preparing the local workforce to meet the needs of local employers, and, if necessary, to import into the Decatur/Macon County region sufficient numbers of workers to ensure that future manufacturing, transportation and healthcare expansions and developments will have all the workers they need; otherwise the city's future economic viability will be at risk.

Discussion. There are numerous agencies in Decatur and Macon County already providing assistance in the area of workforce development. These include: Workforce Investment Solutions, the State of Illinois' Department of Employment Security, the State of Illinois' Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), Richland Community College's workforce development office, OASIS, Good Samaritan, the local Salvation Army, the Trades & Labor Council, the Old King's Orchard Co-op, Homework Hangout, Decatur Public Schools and others. Despite this multi-agency commitment to workforce development, good paying jobs in the manufacturing, transportation logistics and healthcare fields go unfilled due to lack of sufficiently qualified and prepared applicants. We need to help employers find the labor and the skills they need to be successful. Since larger employers often make expansion and new development decisions principally based on the availability of a reliable labor force, this is a troubling situation. So the city wants to take a leadership position helping these existing and future employers build and strengthen their workforces, and have greater confidence in the future depth and quality of the regional workforce.

To change the current available workforce trajectory, the Decatur City Council is prepared to become more directly involved in new collaborations to: 1) more effectively prepare the existing Macon County work force to gain and retain good paying jobs, and 2) market Decatur and its major employers to persons in living in other, carefully selected metropolitan areas by recruiting them into more rigorous training programs that, upon successful completion, would carry with them the promise of a good full-time job.

Development of the Crossings Campus, its proximity to unused low & moderate income housing at Wabash Crossing, the potential launch of a small business incubator (in collaboration with Richland, Millikin, the public schools, CICD other private partners and the SBDC), and adjacent availability of additional workforce training and childcare, presents possibilities for synergies to add significantly to the Decatur and Macon County workforce. The city should take a leadership role in this endeavor because a larger qualified labor pool will result in more economic development and benefit Decatur citizens—some of whom are either unemployed or under-employed.

Goal #2 Strategies.

- 1) Obtain a grant or other funding to finance and deliver a new (more rigorous vocational and life skills) training program [with assistance of Trades & Labor Council] that can attract workers from outside the market area targeted for their suitability to fill unfilled jobs in Macon County with housing and other incentives;
- 2) Secure commitments from major employers that they will participate in the development of the curriculum, and commit to hire those persons that successfully complete the training;
- 3) Use the services of the EDC and others to market training programs, housing availability and other community amenities in targeted markets outside Macon County; and
- 4) Secure housing and other assistance for enrollees.

PRIORITY GOAL #3: TAKE DOWNTOWN DECATUR TO THE NEXT LEVEL BECAUSE A HEALTHY CORE BENEFITS THE WHOLE CITY

Summary of Goal #3: The city of Decatur has made a significant investment in its Downtown. The improved infrastructure has induced private investment in new restaurants, specialty shops and office buildings. Several building owners have opted to upgrade their properties by improving facades and by investing in building infrastructure (such as HAVC systems, structural enhancements, redesign of interiors, etc.). However, the City Council acknowledges that the central business district has not yet reached its full potential to attract more commercial activity, more urban residential living, entertainment, etc.—all of which would help the central business district gain strength and grow outward into adjacent distressed areas and create a well-rounded ‘live-work-play-learn’ environment downtown.

Discussion. During its retreat, the City Council discussed the following downtown strategies:

1. Attract a hotel to the downtown (requires hiring of a hotel consultant)
2. Incentivize additional downtown housing projects
3. Develop amenities to attract more families and visitors to the downtown
4. Collaborate with others to improve the Lincoln Theater
5. Determine the best long-term use for open space between William and North Streets, west of Water Street (events, farmers market, fountain?), and whether/where additional downtown green space should be added
6. Aggressively attract professional and/or retail uses of unoccupied space on the upper floor of the former Sears Building [Decatur Public Library]
7. Organize more special events to attract a wider and more diverse group of citizens and visitors to the downtown, focused on existing downtown open spaces (e.g., Central Park), and have more frequent events
8. Give special attention to rehabilitating the warehouse district north of Eldorado to Wabash Street and the Crossing Campus development; but use of TIF financing should not require additional General Fund subsidy
9. In addition to the above, determine what additional retail and service enhancements would be appropriate additions to downtown

Strategies. Action steps associated with the above strategies include:

1. Commission a market study for a downtown hotel, with a recognized leader in providing such analysis that includes the following information: Is a downtown hotel viable? Is viability dependent upon public financial participation? If appropriate, what types and levels of public participation would be appropriate and publicly supported? What hotel brands would be appropriate in the Decatur market? What are the best sites? What impact would such a development have on other Decatur hotels? What commitments for regular use of a new hotel can be secured from local entities? What would be the likely mix of business and visitor use?

2. If the study determines that a hotel is viable, develop and distribute RFPs to potential hotel developers.
3. Commission an independent study of the viability of new housing in the central business district, including likely developers willing to participate.
4. Based on the findings of the downtown residential study, develop and distribute RFPs to potential downtown residential developers, including likely incentives.
5. Initiate discussions with the current owners of the Lincoln Theater to determine the rehabilitation needs of the building, most likely family-friendly adaptive reuses, costs, and then seek potential investors and partners.
6. Consider the creation of a downtown improvement district (supported by SSA or other funding) to spearhead downtown improvements and transition the downtown area to a more self-sustaining model.
7. Based on the directions and findings listed above, and on likely future driving trends, update the parking needs plan for the central business district.
8. Develop and update municipal codes to incorporate: a) some of the changes in modern signage design and practice; b) the increasing popularity of food trucks; and c) aspects of New Urbanism related to mixed uses, shared parking and higher density living.

PRIORITY GOAL #4: IMPLEMENT SELECTED NEW TECHNOLOGIES THAT WILL IMPROVE MUNICIPAL SERVICE DELIVERY AND CREATE OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCIES

Summary of Goal #4: So-called “Smart Cities” are communities that deploy technology to solve problems, enhance service quality and improve efficiency. Due to financial constraints, the city must select carefully and wisely from the many technology enhancement options now available to municipal governments so that only the most cost-effective solutions, and those most suited to Decatur’s needs, are considered. Cost-benefit analyses should be conducted for each technology before it is approved and deployed to verify that the advantages to city deployment warrant the cost and outweigh any potential liabilities.

Discussion & Strategies. During its planning retreat, the City Council discussed the following new technology strategies:

1. Develop a technology plan for the city of Decatur identifying and illustrating the impact of available municipal technology and whether it can add value to city’s service delivery and the lives of Decatur citizens
2. Create a review process whereby the City Council can continue to monitor and evaluate emerging technologies of relevance to Decatur.
3. Staff will research and identify those technology applications that are most likely to bring added value to municipal problem solving, service delivery and operational efficiency. Technologies to be considered in the short-term include:
 - a. Police worn body cameras
 - b. Surveillance cameras (possibly with GIS & ‘shot-spotter’ interface)
 - c. Artificial Intelligence deployed information-gathering mechanisms that can mine social media and other non-traditional communication platforms to gain greater insight into preferences and needs of Decatur citizens, to improve governance
 - d. Enhanced vehicle tracking and intersection monitoring
 - e. Development of a “Decatur App” to direct citizens and visitors to special events, available downtown parking spaces, and other services (including visitor and guest services)
 - f. Deployment of existing and expanded broadband fiber to commercial and for-profit users—and not just government and non-profits—and use of an expanded broadband network to support more wireless and data sharing among local governments such that revenue can be produced to support more technology investment with less funding from the General Fund.

Recommended implementation of new technologies should be incorporated into the city’s budget beginning in FY 2020 and should be annually evaluated to determine if they are meeting the city’s objectives for service quality enhancement, data collection and efficiency.

PRIORITY GOAL #5: IMPLEMENT NEW REVENUE INITIATIVES AND COST REDUCTION MEASURES DESIGNED TO MAKE DECATUR MORE FINANCIALLY SECURE AND ITS OPERATION MORE SUSTAINABLE

Summary of Goal #5: Like many other Illinois municipalities, the city of Decatur has experienced a steady decline in population as more people leave the State. This directly impacts several categories of General and Special Fund revenues, as well as revenues distributed by State and Federal governments to numerous social service agencies in Macon County. The city of Decatur's budget has structural flaws (unsustainable public safety pensions, declining equalized assessed values, service delivery plans based on a larger population, high amounts of deferred maintenance, etc.) that require the city to vigorously pursue operational efficiencies, find new revenue sources, aggressively pursue annexation to drive up census numbers, and revisit whether or not existing service-delivery levels should be maintained "as-is" or modified to keep the city on a sustainable financial trajectory that can support this plan.

Discussion & Strategies. The City Council tentatively approved the following strategies regarding this priority goal:

1. Develop a budget for FY 2020 that includes a plan for selective cost and service reductions that increase efficiencies without significant impact on current service levels.
2. Examine and implement as council directs new revenue streams that will offset the need for future spending cuts and slowly shift reliance away from property and utility taxes. These include:
 - a. Exploring city operation of a limited virtual electric utility
 - b. Examining ways to monetize the large silt pile located east of the lake and created by the dredging project
 - c. Expanding the use of the city's broadband fiber network to include commercial and for-profit customers
 - d. Licensing Air-BnB, Lyft, Uber and other elements of the 'sharing economy'; and adjust other fees to fit regional city norms
 - e. Sale of surplus properties
 - f. Creative development of other potential revenue streams, including review of current fees to see if they are up-to-date
3. Adopt new City Council budget and financial policies dealing with fund reserve goals, modern budget administration practices, cash management, debt issuance and investment policies, and other policies that will continue to demonstrate to investors, bond underwriters, citizens and other partners that Decatur is on a sound financial footing.
4. To keep property and utility taxes from increasing, aggressively pursue and adopt intergovernmental sharing, consolidation and co-op projects.

PRIORITY GOAL #6: COLLABORATE WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS SO THAT THE MANAGEMENT OF LAKE DECATUR, AND ADJOINING PUBLIC OPEN SPACES, IS INTEGRATED INTO A COORDINATED PLAN

Summary of Goal #6: The city has a long-term obligation to manage Lake Decatur so that it is a safe, clean and resilient water supply for citizens and industry for the rest of the 21st Century. This means the city will need to take steps to more proactively manage the Upper Sangamon River watershed to reduce silt, sediment and nitrates flowing into Lake Decatur, engage in a program of shoreline protection, and regulate recreational uses of Lake Decatur so that they do not undermine water quality and watershed management objectives of the city. But these goals and objectives can also be integrated with efforts to: 1) maximize use of adjacent and adjoining assets, including those owned and operated by the Decatur Park District, the city, and others; 2) create future non-motorized transportation corridors; 3) establish and market other destinations (e.g., the marina, campgrounds, amphitheater, parks, zoo, grasslands and other amenities) that are unique to Decatur.

Discussion. The city and the Park District have collaborated in the past to develop a long-range plan for improvements in the Lake Decatur/Nelson Park/Scovill Park & Big Creek areas, and river-front zones below the dam. These documents need to be updated to reflect changed conditions, new projects added in recent years, and revised strategic directions so that this concentration of special assets and quality-of-life enhancements are taken to the next level.

Strategies. Specifically, this is likely to include the following projects:

1. Improve appearance, services and efficiency in the marina area by outsourcing dock, fuel and marina-related services to a qualified partner in ways that will enhance the city's larger lake management plans and be compatible with open space plans of the city and the Park District.
2. Develop and adopt a plan to connect existing and planned lake-related services to Nelson Park, Scovill Park/Children's Museum, downtown, existing off-road trails on the west side of the city in a way that both enhances bicycle and pedestrian networks, but also establishes viable non-motorized transportation corridors connecting key parts of the city.
3. Create a multi-year plan to balance the costs of lake maintenance and patrol with revenues derived from users of the lake, and move all of these costs and revenues to the Water Fund.
4. Implement the recommendations of a Lake Management Plan so that the quantity of sediment, silt and nitrates entering Lake Decatur is significantly reduced, and adopt other strategies designed to assure good water and watershed stewardship practices for the long-term future.

PRIORITY GOAL #7: CREATE A BOLD AND ASPIRATIONAL VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF DECATUR AND LINK SHORTER TERM GOALS TO THAT VISION TO ENSURE IT IS UNTIMATELY REALIZED

Summary of Goal #7: Leaders of successful communities invest time and resources into the development of long-range aspirational visions. Short-term plans should support long-range ones. With many governmental and non-governmental units all engaged in different aspects of community planning, it is sometimes challenging to coordinate and integrate these planning efforts. But in an environment with limited resources it is imperative that the city and its partners and stakeholders always engage in community planning in a collaborative and coordinated fashion.

Discussion. An aspirational vision for the future of Decatur begins with the community's key assets: 1) industrial manufacturing base and its ancillary industrial support services; 2) an attractive and viable downtown; 3) abundant open-space and recreational amenities; 4) significant municipal infrastructure that has the capacity to support a larger population and commercial/industrial presence; 5) the presence of educational institutions that are "plugged-in" to the community in ways that foster life-long-learning; 6) the city's role as a regional provider of a vast array of goods and services that Central Illinois needs—from health care to professional services to general and boutique retail to diverse dining and entertainment options; and 7) governmental and non-governmental organizations that are ready and willing to work together for the betterment of Decatur and Macon County.

Possible Strategies:

The June 2019 Council Planning Retreat did not espouse a short aspirational vision statement to serve as a brand phrase for public use; but this outcome should be developed in 2020 in a way that joins and links the plans, projects and visions of Decatur's partners to create a new aspirational vision—from which new capital and operational plans can flow, and be connected with one another. These could include items specifically mentioned by the council (below) and others.

1. Reach out to national and regional planning organizations such as the American Association of Planners (APA) and the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and others to serve as neutral conveners of coordinated planning efforts.
2. The result of this process should be incorporated into the next update of the city's comprehensive plan (last updated in 2009).
3. Work with the Macon Community Foundation to enlarge a foundation-sponsored student loan repayment program designed to attract and retain recent university graduates to live and remain in Decatur after the completion of their 4-year degrees.