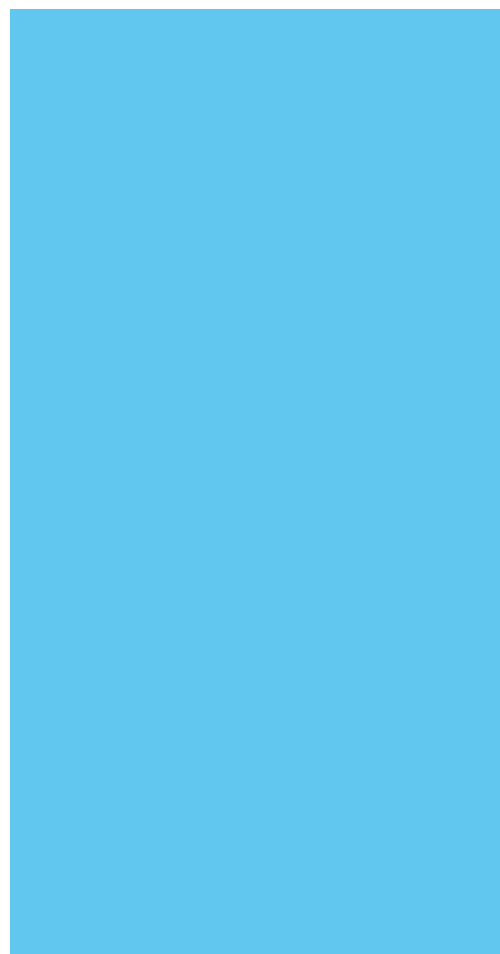


Vergas Comprehensive Plan 2022-2036



Acknowledgements

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This comprehensive plan represents a significant community effort by the residents and leaders of Vergas who worked together to develop a vision and solutions for the community.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the development process of this plan and contributed your local knowledge and guidance. These pieces of wisdom were invaluable in the planning process.



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Executive Summary

Overview

In 2021, the City of Vergas launched a process to develop its first comprehensive plan. The plan's creation was intended to develop a clear vision, accompanied by specific strategies driven by community input and previous planning efforts. The City of Vergas, the Planning Commission, and the City Council agreed to facilitate an inclusive and transparent process, providing plenty of opportunities for community involvement.

Key themes of the plan

While the plan covers 6 topics, community input identified the following overarching themes that they would like to focus on in the next fifteen years:

- Transportation and Parking
- Housing
- Business Development

Chapter Structure

Each chapter includes the following sections: Topic overview, the current state, relevant community survey findings, trends, and specific goals, strategies, and actions to guide future growth, conservation, and development of the City of Vergas. The goals, strategies, and actions were developed from direct stakeholder input and refined using feedback from the Steering Committee.

Previous Planning Efforts

This is the first comprehensive plan for the City of Vergas. The 2022 Comprehensive Plan incorporates content from Vergas' 2019 Capital Improvement Plan and 2020 Housing Study, as well as the Otter Tail County Long-Range Strategic Plan.

Implementation

Each planning topic has specific goals and strategies to support implementation. Appendix X outlines specific projects and programs stemming from community input that may not have fit easily into the existing topic sections.



Introduction

Situated in the northwest corner of Otter Tail County in what many Minnesotans know as 'lake country', the City of Vergas comprised about 350 residents as of 2020. Vergas is located approximately 60 miles east of Fargo-Moorhead and makes the center of a 'wheel' of Perham, Detroit Lakes, and Pelican Rapids. The city serves as a bedroom community, with many residents working in surrounding communities, and offers a tight-knit community atmosphere, outdoor recreational opportunities, and public events.

Founded back in 1903, and at the time known as the Village of Altona, Vergas' historical roots lie in the establishment of the Soo Line Railroad, which still has its mark on the town's footprint. Early settlers, mostly veterans of the Civil War and immigrants from Germany, Poland, Russia, and Scandinavian countries, made Vergas their home.

Historically, Vergas was home to a variety of industries and small business owners, ranging anywhere from blacksmithing to meat markets to hotels and lumbering. Today, the three largest employment drivers include construction, retail trade, and arts, entertainment, and recreation. Vergas is the home of the world's largest Loon, a destination for visitors locally and across the state, and speaks to the importance of the creative economy for the community.

The major highways that serve Vergas include Otter Tail County Roads 4, 17, 35 and 60. The closest State Highways are MN TH10 to the east



Satellite image of the City of Vergas

courtesy of Esri: wcif.maps.arcgis.com

and MN TH69 to the west. The City of Vergas comprises 991 acres, 351 parcels of land, and 3 parcels of lake. It thrives off the reach it has beyond the city's limit, to the surrounding lake residents, such as Long Lake and Lawrence Lake, as well as the seasonal fluctuations of those residents--often homeowners in the Twin Cities and Fargo-Moorhead.

Vergas is well-known for the community's high level of civic engagement, hosting public events throughout the year for residents (year-round and seasonal) to contribute to the lively spirit of the seasons. As the pandemic continues to drive the outmigration of urban dwellers to rural places across the state of Minnesota, the demand for development in and around Vergas will likely continue, given that certain basic services, such

as broadband, are made available. This makes Vergas well-positioned to capitalize on this trend and increase its volunteer-base, which is quickly seeking new leadership to transition responsibility to younger members of the community.

The comprehensive plan is intended to guide the City of Vergas as it continues to make decisions regarding the future of growth and development and will be the first in the city's history. The time taken to ground the vision in the needs and interests of the community will not only allow the City to access funding and grants for development projects but serve as a key foundation and roadmap that will help decisionmakers keep the community's values front and center.

A comprehensive plan is an expression of the community's vision for the future and a strategic map to reach that vision. Comprehensive planning is an important tool for cities to guide future development of land to ensure a safe, pleasant, and economical environment for residential, commercial, industrial, and public activities.

A comprehensive plan sets forth a vision and goals for a city's future and provides the overall foundation for all land use regulation in the city. State law encourages all cities to prepare and implement a comprehensive municipal plan. Under state law, a city planning commission or department is tasked with creating the city's comprehensive plan.

The planning process generally follows three key steps:

- 1. A community takes stock of where it is today.***
- 2. The community generates a shared vision and goals for what the city will be like in the future.***
- 3. The city develops a set of specific strategies to achieve that vision over time.***

This plan offers a roadmap for the City of Vergas to prioritize future development decisions and identifies a set of specific goals and strategies to address these issues that align with the community's vision for the future. The comprehensive plan should be considered a living document that the city can amend and update as needed. These amendments may occur following regular reviews or can occur as changes are identified. To amend the plan, changes should be identified and then presented to the Planning Commission for approval.

The Process



Steering Committee



Focus Groups



Community Survey



Public Meetings



Final Draft & Approval

Process

Steering Committee

In August 2021, the City of Vergas began the planning process by nominating members of the community to participate in a Comprehensive Planning Steering Committee. The role of the steering committee was to build consensus and support regarding the topics, approaches, and policies outlined in the comprehensive plan project. The steering committee worked with West Central Initiative, city staff, and other local leaders while engaging the public for input throughout the duration of the project. The steering committee also provided recommendations to the Planning Commission and City Council on the drafting and adopting the Comprehensive Plan.

The steering committee, City staff, and West Central Initiative facilitated 2 public meetings and 6 focus groups from October 2021 to February 2022. They also distributed a community survey for 30 days in January and February.

Focus Groups

From January to February 2022, the Steering Committee hosted 7 focus groups, taking place in a variety of formats, and focusing on both narrow target audiences and the broader public. Approximately 87 people were engaged through this process. The focus groups are summarized in the table below.

Target Audience or Focus Group Theme	Focus Group Description
Youth	Conversation & Cocoa at the Ice Rink on Long Lake
Land Use and Built Form	Facilitated conversation at Planning Commission Meeting
Housing	Facilitated conversation at Vergas Housing Redevelopment Authority
Economic & Business Development, Broadband, Tourism, Parks and Open Spaces	Rotating table activity with Community Club & Public at Vergas Event Center
Transportation	Facilitated conversation and mapping activity at Vergas Lions Club Meeting
Seasonal residents and retired residents	Virtual meeting via Zoom
Assisted living residents	Informal conversation at Vergas Assisted Living

Community Survey

From January 7th-February 28th, 2022, residents, visitors, and area residents were invited to participate in the comprehensive plan community survey, asking questions across all areas of the community to seek input on specific challenges, opportunities, and priorities for the City. Both paper and online surveys were available and promoted in the local paper, on the social media pages of local businesses, and in the City's newsletter. 77 people participated in the survey (52 online and 25 print). A summary of the survey results can be found on the City's Comprehensive Plan webpage, and salient findings are integrated into the plan where appropriate.

Public Meetings/Open-House Style Meetings

October Open House

In October 2021, the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee hosted its first public engagement activity as an open house-style meeting at Billy's Bar downtown. The Vergas HRA sponsored a meal from Billy's, and large boards were placed throughout the restaurant to collect feedback on the following questions:

- What do you like?
- What do you not like?
- What do you want more of?
- What do you want less of?
- What are your big ideas for the future of Vergas?
- How do you want to be engaged in the Comprehensive Plan?

June Public Meeting

On June 16th, the Steering Committee hosted its final informal public engagement activity, which was held in conjunction with Otter Coffee's live music and food trucks on Main Street. Draft goals and strategies were printed on large paper and shared with the community for feedback to 1) Illustrate to residents and visitors how feedback from the public meetings were incorporated into the plan and 2) Solicit feedback on the goals and strategies for improvements or changes that could then be incorporated into the final draft.

Community Profile

While Vergas is the home of “The World’s Largest Loon”, just over 350 individuals also call the town home. A quarter of the population is over 65 years of age and 20 percent is age 18 or younger. This close-knit community includes 155 households with a median household income of \$45,625 annually. (ACS 2019)

Locals note, “It’s a great place to visit, and an even better place to live!” This rings true as many residents choose to live in Vergas and commute to surrounding cities for work. Vergas is also a regional and statewide destination for its many lakes, its public swimming beach, the giant loon in Long Lake Park, and the many unique events that take place over the course of the year: Looney Days, the Hairyman Run, Maple Syrup Festival, and Small Town Christmas, and Vergas Day of Play, just to name a few. In fact, these events were cited many times by residents and visitors at the public meetings and focus groups held to gather more input on the topic of tourism and seasonal residency.

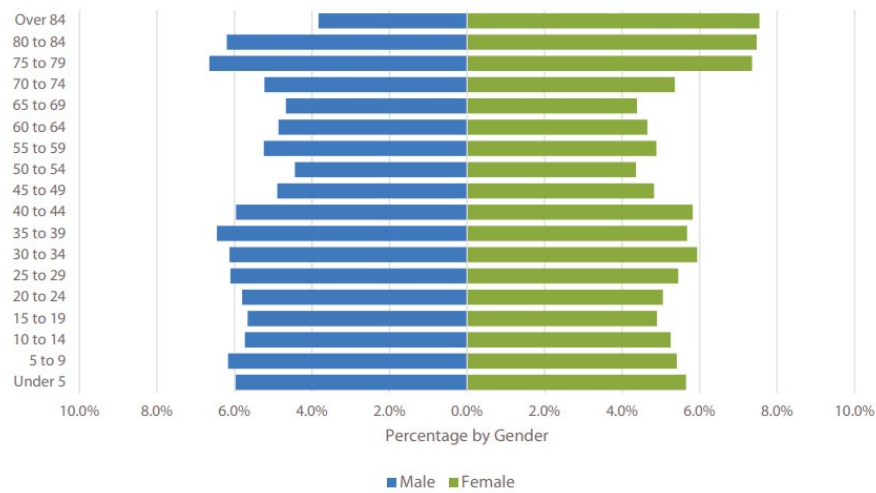


Belonging to Ottertail County, Vergas is part of an area in which the cost of living is \$47,196. The county’s unemployment rate is lower than the state average and hovers slightly above 5%. When considering the workforce, 91% of individuals in the area hold a high school diploma and 61% are college educated. (MN DEED 2020)

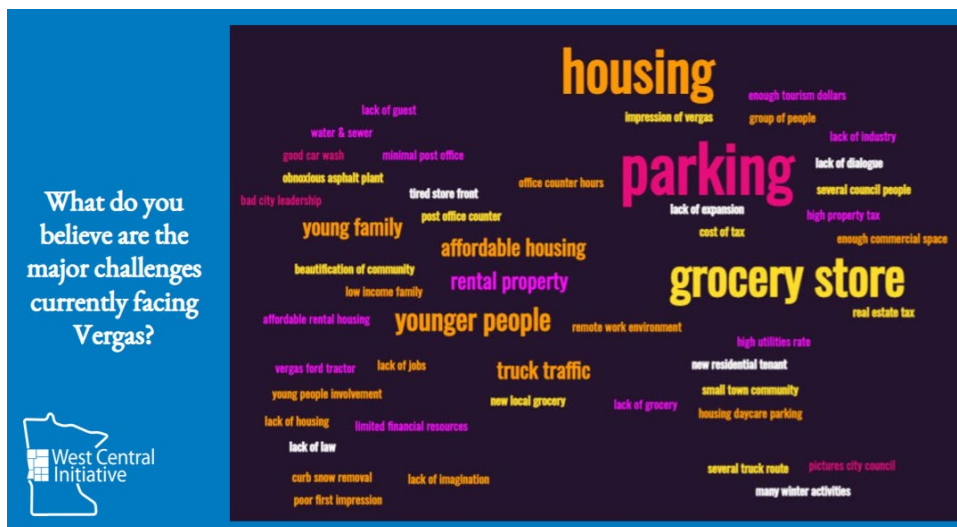
Health Care and Social Assistance (20.7%) Manufacturing (18.1) Retail Trade (11.7) are the largest industries. Health Care and Social Assistance, Accommodation and Food Services, and Retail Trade are the industries with the highest number of vacancies. (MN Deed 2020).

Otter Tail County is no stranger to the age-wave affecting Greater Minnesota with more deaths than births regarding natural population. There is a slight increase in growth coming from immigration. (MN DEED 2020). Figure 1, a population pyramid projected for Otter Tail County in 2040 illustrates that the largest age segments of the population are expected to fall at age 75 and above, representing a significant demand for services supporting these age groups.

Figure 4: Population Pyramid, 2040



Source: MN Demographer



Goals, Strategies & Actions

The following goals, strategies, and actions draw from a combination of the survey, feedback from 2 public meetings and 8 focus groups held from October 2021-May 2022, a public comment period and public hearing, and feedback solicited from regional stakeholders.

Goals

The goals for the comprehensive plan were developed using public input and comment. The steering committee reviewed and revised the goals to ensure that they were appropriate for the City of Vergas. The purpose of the goals is to serve as guidelines for the comprehensive plan and were intentionally designed to be broad and encompassing of the community's vision for the future.

Strategies

The strategies, which are nested under each of the goals, describe a plan of action towards the goals. They take into consideration the underlying values, principles, and/or context for each goal.

Actions

The actions, nested under each of the strategies, are designed to provide more specific guidance for project-related items, personnel needs, and defining specific department's responsibility, more clearly articulating how to achieve each goal.

Land Use & Built Form

Overview

This section describes where new housing, workplaces, and retail establishments may locate in the city to achieve the plan goals. The city may utilize a combination of policies and maps to guide development decisions. The land use maps included in this section allow developers and city personnel to make decisions regarding proposals for new construction or developments and will be a useful tool as Vergas explores the ideal locations for additional housing units and retail establishments. These maps take into consideration public engagement activities related to housing to ensure that Vergas has options throughout the city. Furthermore, these recommendations outline ways to support employment growth and ensure that land is available for living-wage jobs close to where people live. Land use maps related to parks and open space are included in a separate section, with the understanding that there may be overlap in these respective areas.

Community Input

Since land use is the physical development of the city, it overlaps with most sections of the plan. Thus, the physical aspects were noted in the following sections that will provide for improvements to take place in their respective domain. Maintaining the rural aesthetic and feel, however, was an overarching theme informing land use, aesthetic, and the physical domain. In focus group discussions, community members understood change as something inevitable and the planning commission specifically noted land use strategies as a way for change to happen, “in a meaningful and organized way.”

Housing

Survey and focus group results indicate a strong need for single family, detached housing and affordable (not subsidized) rental housing. Most focus group respondents also see a need for single level housing for seniors looking to transition from a larger family home.

Economic and Business Development

Focus group respondents communicated a need for retail and commercial spaces for owners to rent. They noted the lack of opportunity in the downtown area for start-ups that do not have the ability to own and build their own property. This, in return, discourages potential businesses that respondents also indicated a need for within the community.

Land use as it pertains to parking also presents a challenge to several topics within the plan and poses a barrier for businesses specifically when centered around the downtown area. Residents expressed that the lack of parking discourages business activity, limits residents with limited mobility, and poses a safety issue when the town hosts some of its largest festivals and events.

Parks and Recreation, Tourism

As a town known for its residential offerings, seasonal living, and tourism, the physical parks and community spaces of Vergas are of the utmost importance. Residents expressed support for expanding the park on Long Lake and developing sports fields for activities intended for all ages.

Current State

The input coming from public engagement demonstrates that zoning restrictions are not the barrier to further development of the city. Rather, when viewing the zoning map with focus group discussions in mind, there is a clear need to extend city limits and expand to make way for the future developments expressed above. The physical geography limits expansion in the downtown area to some extent as water poses a barrier while also adding to the attractiveness of the area. Development, then, will need to come in the form of negotiating with landowners while also working with legal counsel to broaden the city's geographical base.

Any outward expansion, of course, would be a slow process and rely on the capacity of sewer and water systems to accommodate more households and businesses. The city is in discussions on how to update while also keeping the cost of public utilities reasonable (see Appendix A).

Trends

Several nearby towns were built between lakes, like Vergas, and have focused on annexing shoreline properties over the course of decades to expand their limits. They slowly grew their parameters in exchange for providing city services, providing for a mutually beneficial arrangement. This strategy allowed for the cities to expand and develop gradually while not overloading its systems.

Notably, the relationship between built structures and the natural environment has gone through a transformation in the past four decades. Society is evolving to appreciate the integration between natural features and man-made structures—a sentiment that many rural residents have valued over time. For example, cities look towards the installation of natural playgrounds, and seek power technology through the environment in the form of solar panels and windmills. Zoning, traditionally a clear-cut practice known for black and white decisions, needs to respond to this shift in thinking to accommodate the contemporary needs of cities.

GOAL 1: Land use and built form decisions support and celebrate the existing character of the town

STRATEGY	ACTION
Encourage land uses that strengthen Vergas' reputation as a family-friendly, safe place with a small-town charm	
Limit land uses that allow for big box stores, chains, large processing plants, or other developments that have short-term gains and long-term losses of community character and environmental protection	
Ensure that any land use involving light industrial developments has a plan in place for maintenance and accessibility	
Encourage or offer tax incentives for parking for new construction	Explore both above and underground parking

GOAL 2: Capitalize on in-fill opportunities and direct growth to new areas where infrastructure is planned to be cost-effective and sustainable

STRATEGY	ACTION
When considering expansion options, prioritize expansion that follows a set of guidance developed through growth and management plan	Develop tiered system for expansion based on Vergas' sewer and water capacity, EMS services, and other public services and facilities.
Expand the horizons and investigate annexing shorelines across bodies of water when landowners are favorable to the request	

Housing

Overview

The topic of housing aims to investigate the availability of housing within a community alongside the needs of current and future residents of the city. Housing--whether it be apartments, condos, single homes, etc.--provides a foundation in which the residents root themselves in order to ultimately create community. This section strives to assess the type and amount of housing available, measured against what residents need and want in a community that prides itself in being an exceptional place to live whether residents work there or not.

Current State

In 2020, the City of Vergas contracted with KLJ engineering to develop a housing plan, outlining the projections for housing needs in the coming 15 years. Some findings of this plan's community survey conducted as part of this study indicated that residents felt high taxes, utilities, or housing prices were a barrier to moving to Vergas. The study recommended a comparison between Vergas housing, tax, and utility costs and other nearby cities to rank Vergas' competitiveness. The comprehensive plan sought to create this comparison, the full results of which can be found in Appendix C. It includes Vergas' utility rates (water, sewer), waste collection and recycling, storm water fees, and property taxes for homes with a value of \$250,000 and \$400,000 against 11 other communities: Candor, Dora, and Hobart Townships, Pelican Rapids, Perham, Audubon, Callaway, Frazee, Underwood, Ottertail, and Battle Lake.

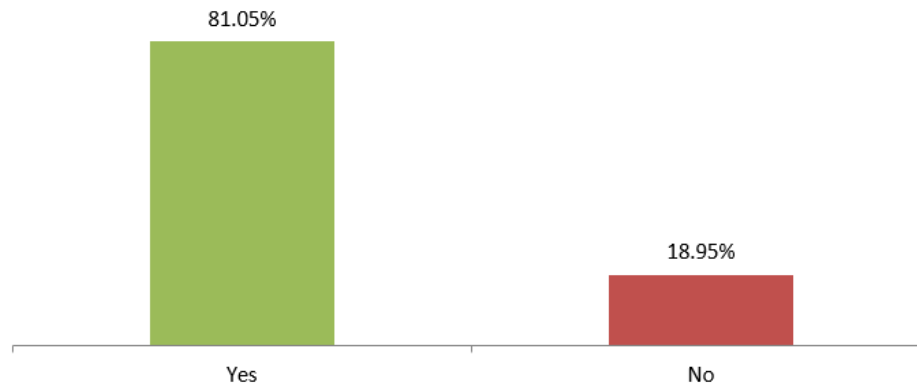
The key finding from this evaluation is that the property taxes in both brackets (homes valued at 250K and 400K) are most closely aligned with the property taxes in Perham, Pelican Rapids, and Battle Lake--communities significantly larger, offering additional community amenities. For example, both Perham and Pelican Rapids have a swimming pool (Pelican Rapids plans to improve its outdoor swimming pool). Perham is home to a large community center with an indoor walking track, several gyms for open play, and space for large sports competitions. Vergas' largest comparable asset is Long Lake and the public swimming beach, which is a destination for residents across the region due to the limited number of public access areas on the lakes. It is worth considering what has made these communities attractive places to live aside from recreational opportunities. For example, Battle Lake prides itself on being a strong arts community, and Perham and Pelican Rapids both have a strong industry base in food processing. Similarly, Vergas can capitalize on existing assets to develop its own regional reputation, distinct from surrounding communities.

Community Input

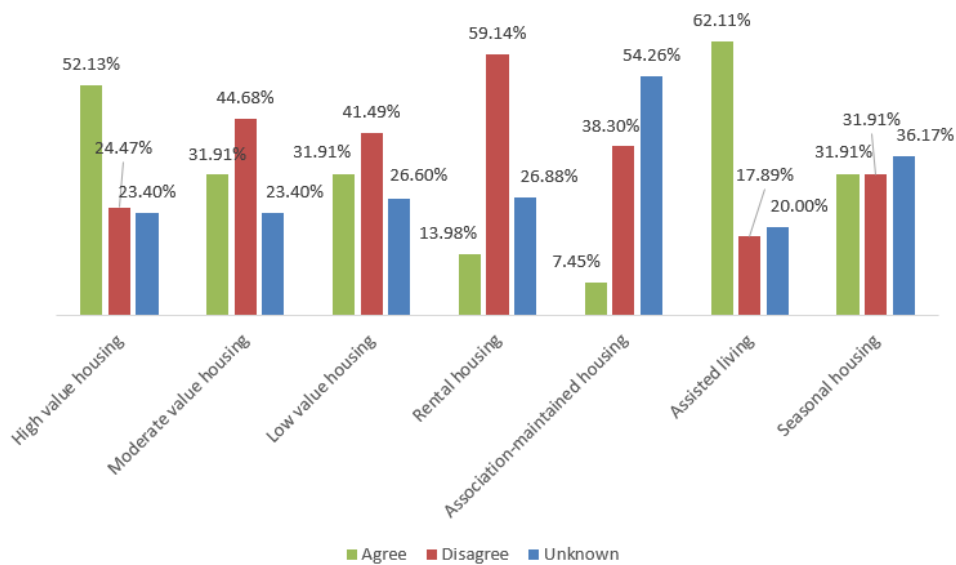
From the housing study, some of the standout findings are summarized below.

- Many respondents indicate they intend to live in Vergas for the rest of their life, or at least until a major life event instigates a move. This may mean that there will be very little turnover in the existing housing stock. However, at some point in time, between ten and fifteen years from now, there will likely be a major turnover in existing housing stock ownership.

Do you believe Vergas has a need for working with developers to create additional residential options?

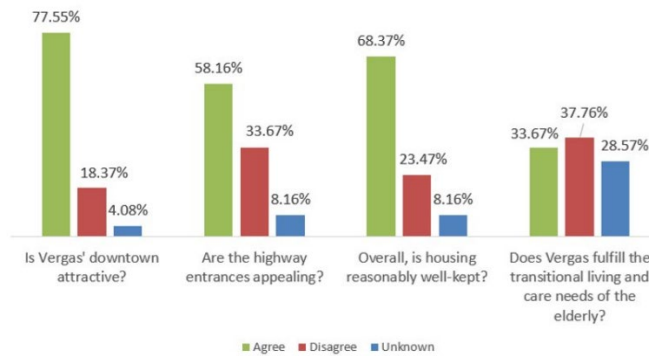


Vegas currently has a sufficient amount of...



The graph above demonstrates respondents' impression that Vergas is lacking in rental housing. It will be important for Vergas in the next 15 years to use existing and future land use plans to identify the ideal locations for future apartment developments.

Please rate the following questions with Agree, Disagree, or Unknown. Mark only one response for each question.



Trends

The following goals and strategies take into account the significant increase in demand for housing in the region as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Described as the Rural Rebound Movement, or the Great American Migration of 2020, people have been moving from urban areas to rural places across the country, driving. In fact, in an article published by Greater Fergus Falls in early 2021, they write that “Bankrate reported that the number of mortgages obtained for homes in non-urban areas increased by 36% in 2020”ⁱ, representing a significant uptick in the demand for rural homes and potential for Vergas to shift the trends that were predicted as part of the housing study completed in 2020.

The rate of inflation and housing market behavior coming out of the first year of the pandemic created an increasingly competitive environment for buying and selling houses. On average property taxes in Otter Tail County rose 10-30 percent in the year 2021 alone while the price of housing and home improvement projects continues to rise.

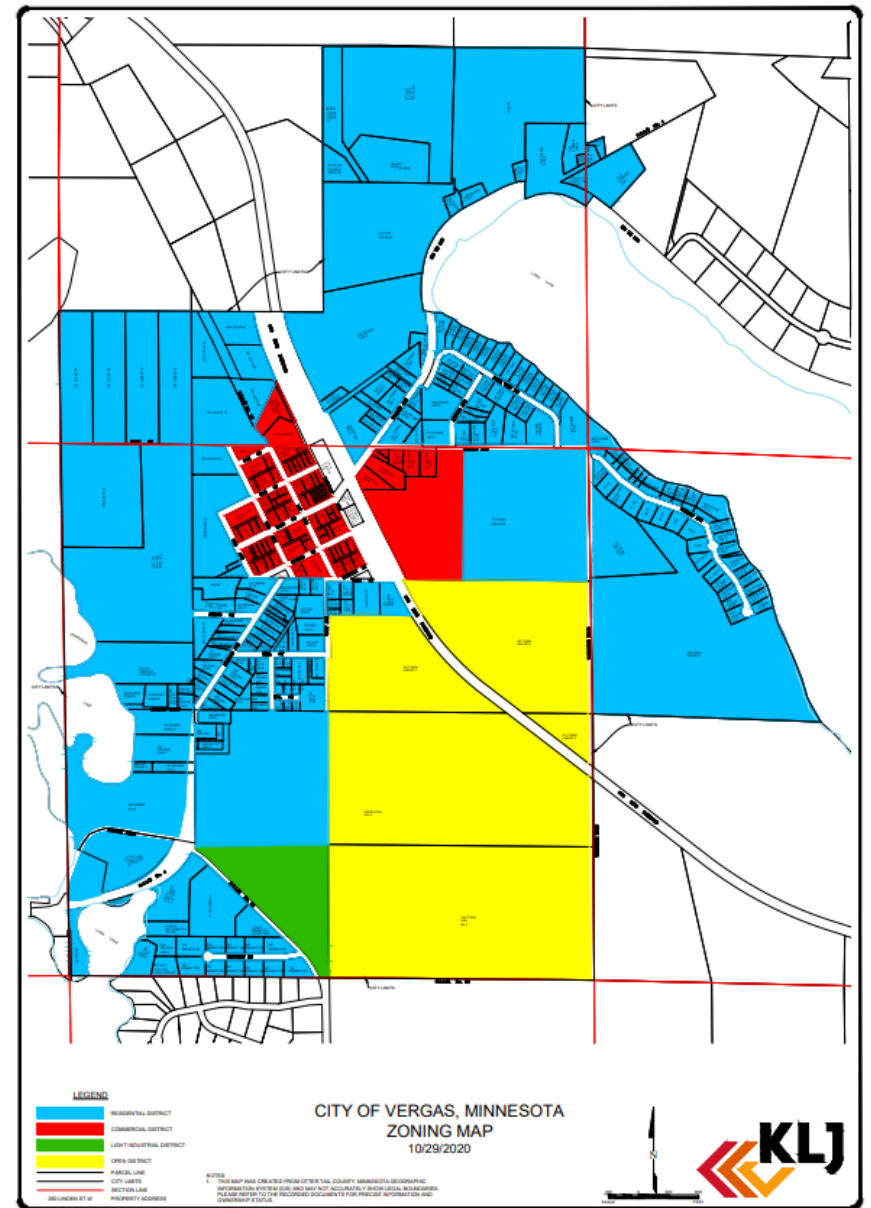
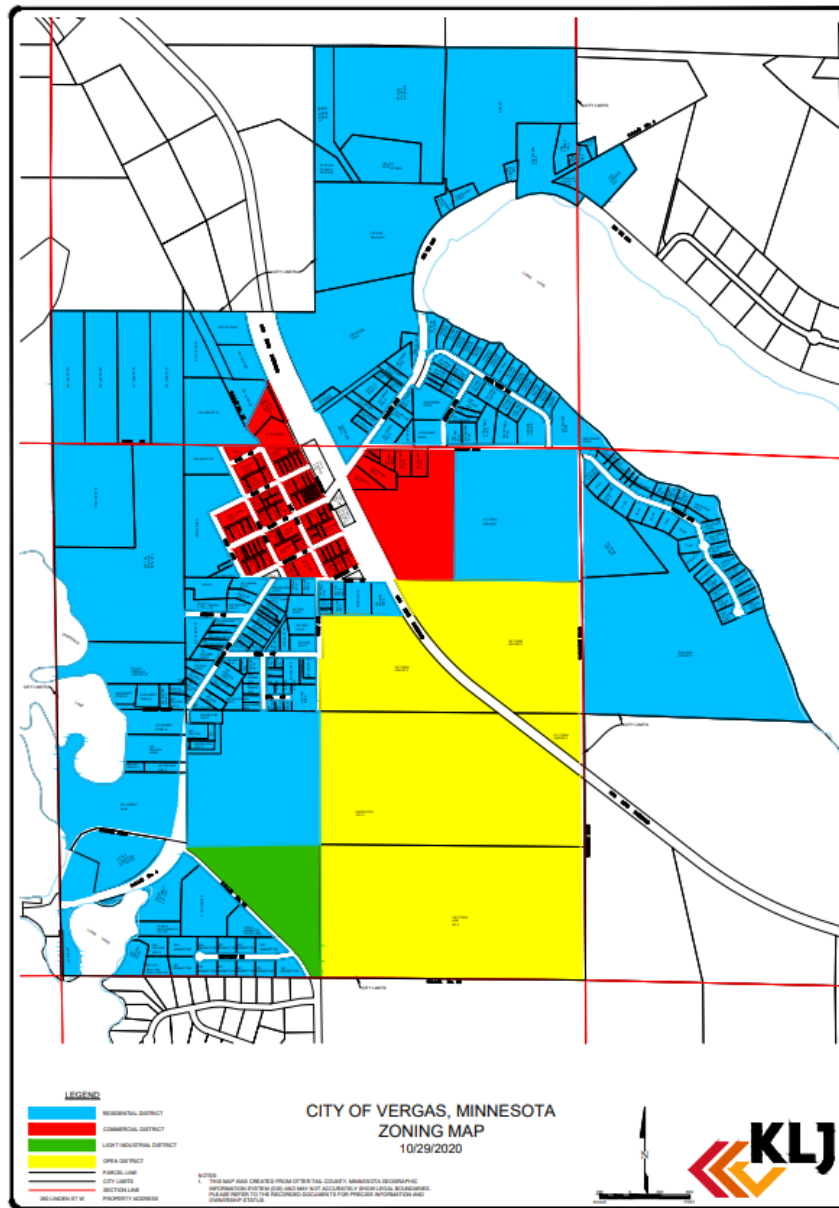
Overall, following goals related to housing seek to address the concerns and needs highlighted by the housing study and public engagement to serve as a framework for future development decisions and ensure that both housing supply and choice are increased.

GOAL 3: Identify affordable housing lots that can be developed within the next 5 years

STRATEGY	ACTION
Develop partnerships with Otter Tail County to share county-level resources with local developers and future residents via existing incentives and initiatives	
Conduct an inventory and promote lots available	Utilize City website by adding housing resources comparable to neighboring cities (Ex. Battle Lake)

GOAL 4: Providing high efficiency, low-cost water, sewer, and energy

STRATEGY	ACTION
Improve education available for residents related to water and energy conservation	Add Clean Energy Resource Teams to website Increase awareness of accessible, eco home improvement
Encourage a culture that celebrates and normalizes responsible landscaping	Consider sponsoring a local garden tour, highlighting residents using native plants and grasses
Explore renewable energy sources	Investigate solar panels and other options
Communicate local and regional existing resources available to residents (ex. Compost, recycling)	



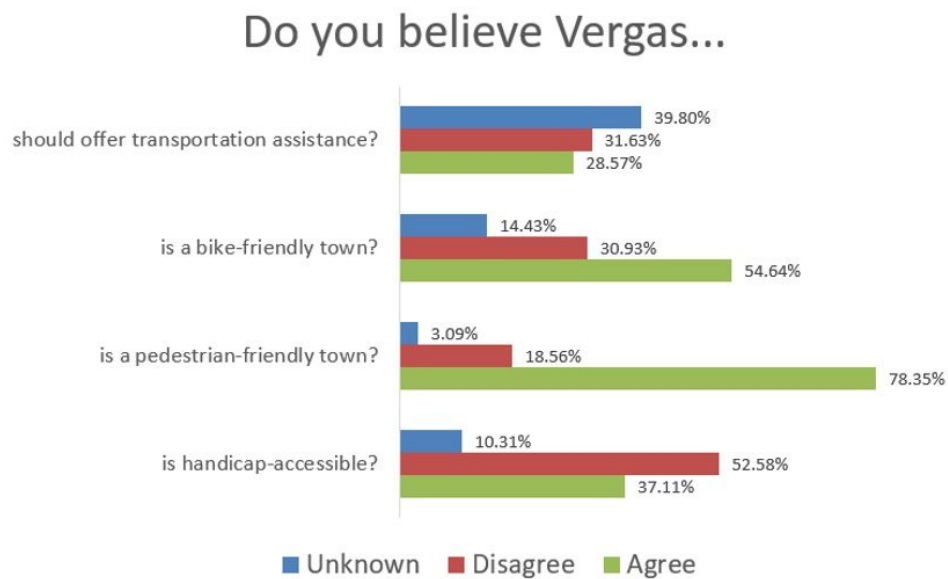
Transportation

Overview

The goals, strategies, and actions included in this section work to support a more walkable, bikeable, and transit-friendly community. They are intended to achieve outcomes that increase equity in Vergas' transportation system, address climate change and reduce carbon emissions, improve human health through improved air quality and increases in active travel, and enable the movement of people, goods, and services across the community.

Community Input:

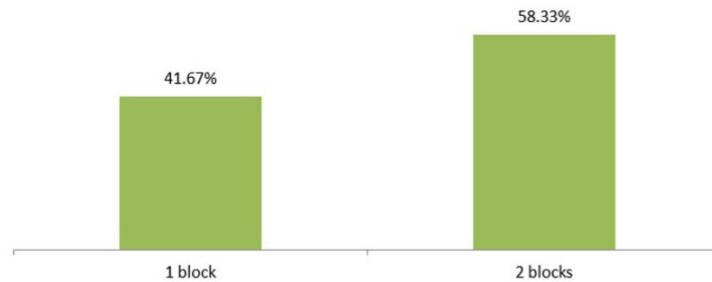
The community survey revealed that parking access downtown and the train blocking traffic are two major concerns. As the City moves forward in exploring options for future parking, a key question that they wanted to know included how far people were willing to walk from their vehicles to their destination in town (Graph X below).



Survey result takeaways:

- There is **no clear consensus** on whether the city should offer transportation assistance
- More than half of respondents **agreed** that Vergas is bike-friendly
- More than half of respondents **disagreed** that Vergas is handicap-accessible

How far are you willing to walk from your parked vehicle to your downtown destination?



Focus group participants highlighted two areas of interest: increasing safety through sidewalks and trails and supporting recreational activities and active transportation through trails. In discussions, respondents stressed the lack of sidewalks within city limits and how this poses a challenge for pedestrians around town. Support for investing in trail systems in and around the City of Vergas found support from the motivations of increasing safety of bikers and maintaining and attracting the biking community to boost recreational activity and tourism. Ultimately, focus group participants were in favor of keeping bikers away from highways and on designated trails.

Current State

Vergas' main transportation network is comprised of its municipal street system, the two highways that bisect the community, and the railroad line. Highway 4 cuts diagonally north-south through Vergas, Highway 17 intersects Highway 4 from the northwest, and the railroad runs parallel to Highway 17 to the north. The highways serve as two primary thoroughfares through the community for not only residential and visitors, but significant industrial traffic.

In recent years, the approval of regional trail expansions is likely to increase the attractiveness of Vergas as both a destination for recreation and a place to live. This includes both the Pelican Rapids to Perham Trail in Otter Tail County and the Heartland Trail in Becker County.

Trends

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) is taking a holistic approach to developing the state's means of transportation in both urban and rural areas. Its "Complete Streets" program seeks to encourage the health and well-being of not only Minnesotans, but also their economy and environment. To do so, MnDOT factors in the following:

- Community context
- Topography
- Road function
- Traffic speed
- Freight volumes
- Pedestrian and bicyclist demand

Options that may - or may not - be selected, depending on each project's unique situation, could include:

1. Paved shoulders
2. Sidewalks
3. Bicycle lanes
4. Pedestrian refuge medians
5. Truck mountable curbs in roundabouts
6. Signal retiming
7. Updated striping
8. Bus stop access

GOAL: Make Vergas accessible for all modes of transportation and for people of all abilities

STRATEGY	ACTION
Identify key places across the city that can improve handicap-accessibility	Conduct an ADA audit or other type of evaluation that can identify the key areas for improvement across the city.
Communicate and market existing transportation services (Ex. Neighbor to Neighbor)	Create short reference guide for residents and visitors describing local and regional transportation options
Identify additional locations for downtown parking downtown	Work with the Planning Commission to determine if vacant or undeveloped property could serve as space for new parking lots, and potential for diagonal parking
Construct handicapped parking spots and sidewalks along County Road 4	
Explore the advantages and disadvantages of rerouting Highway 4 through downtown to reduce through-traffic on Main Street	
Explore options for reducing stopped trains and subsequent stopped traffic	This could include, but is not limited to: Contacting Canada Pacific to move the exchange back
Promote programs that promote ridesharing networks and services	Example programs that could be promoted include Neighbor to Neighbor, veteran services transportation

Goal: Increase connectivity between Vergas and regional trails

STRATEGY	ACTION
Connect Vergas to the Pelican Rapids-to-Perham Trail.	Consult with entities like MnDOT, the DNR, WCI, and PartnerSHIP 4 Health about pursuing grants for planning and infrastructure for a trail connection
Connect Vergas to the Heartland Trail.	Work with Otter Tail County to pursue grant funding to connect the Heartland Trail along County Road 4.
Construct a multi-use path from downtown Billy's Corner Bar & Grill to the Veterans Memorial.	Add multi-use path to the update of the 2019 Capital Improvement Plan to ensure that it is included in a future city budget

Economic & Business Development

Overview

Economic and Business Development refers to the growth of resources within community through more business activity, increasing job opportunities, and workforce development. Historically, conversations surrounding economics and businesses begin and end with money. Increasing awareness and understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion and healthy communities allows us to shift our understanding of this section, bringing people to the center of success in this realm of development through sustainable means.

Vergas' character as a bedroom community in which many residents commute to surrounding towns for work creates a unique foundation for economic and business development in the city. The service industry is key in terms of providing and creating jobs for residents, and seasonal tourism elevates the importance of these businesses.

Community Input

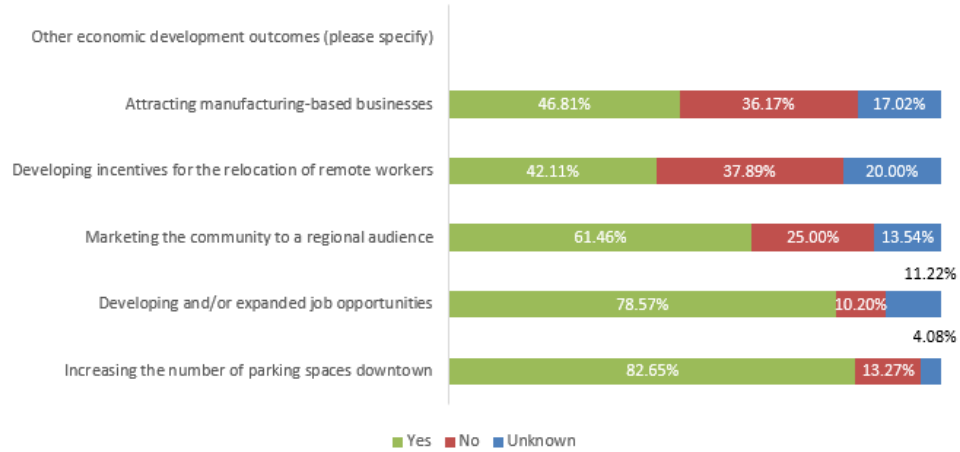
When asked about economic and business development, residents almost exclusively focused on expanding opportunities in the service industry and retail, alongside exploring the sector of light manufacturing. Above all, residents prioritize maintaining the rural character of Vergas, and at the same time see a need to make the city more attractive and family friendly by adding services like a car wash and more restaurants, and possibly more job opportunities through light manufacturing. To bring these new businesses to town, most focus group participants agreed that the city should focus on developing new spaces in which businesses could operate.

Vergas residents understand the need to grow population to boost the city's economy. Like many cities in west central Minnesota, suitable options for housing and childcare concern the community when it comes to creating new jobs and attracting new residents.

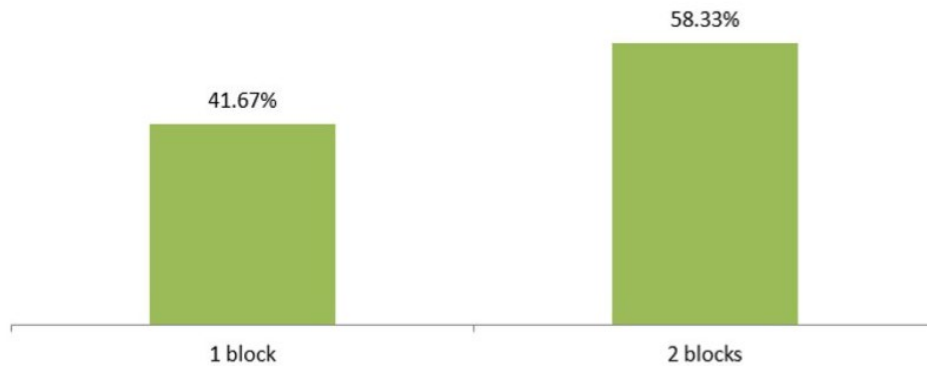
Economic activity typically triples in the summer for Vergas, largely due to the influx of seasonal residents and visitors with second homes in the surrounding townships. Survey data from the 2020 housing study supports this claim, finding that out of 115 respondents, 103 said they live in their residence year-round, and 12 said they use it seasonally. This creates economic challenges, as it can be difficult to sustain certain employment opportunities year-round, retain seasonal employees from year-to-year, and ensure that businesses are generating enough revenue during peak seasons to sustain themselves financially year-round.

Community Survey Findings:

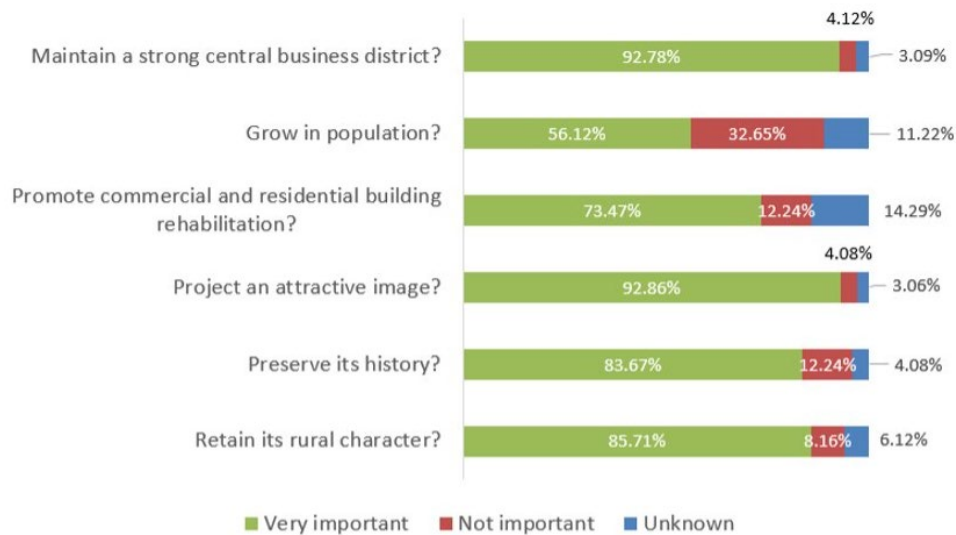
Do you believe the community should focus its energy, talents, and dollars on the following economic development outcomes in the next five years?



How far are you willing to walk from your parked vehicle to your downtown destination?



How important is it for Vergas to...



Current State

Based on the plan's community survey results, only a quarter of Vergas residents work in the city. Therefore, to fully assess the economic viability of the community it is helpful to step back and look towards the county-level indicators on the state of economic development.

Pre-Pandemic Information: [WCI Otter Tail County Snap Shot](#)

In Spring of 2022, Otter Tail County tracked 1,000+ current job openings, projected that 320 jobs will be added in the next 3 years by the leading industries and predicted a 1,300-person reduction in available labor in the next 10 years due to an aging population and skill gap. The county has created the OTC Works Workforce Strategy to address these economic development challenges, which informs the goals and strategies of this comprehensive plan.

Trends

The Minnesota Association of Development Organizations (MADO) has identified four cornerstones for strong and healthy communities: Human Capital, Economic Competitiveness, Community Resources, and Foundational Assets. By investing in the four cornerstones, rural communities create the conditions necessary for a successful economy resilient enough to withstand the challenges of the 21st century.

Opportunities for Human Capital:

- Population and workforce expansion through immigration
- Investment in talent retention and attraction
- Utilizing retirees' knowledge and experience
- Marketing quality of life and economic opportunity

- Entrepreneur training
- Develop and implement college and career awareness programs

Opportunities in Economic Competitiveness:

- Support societally and environmentally aware entrepreneurs/businesses
- Challenge the business perception of MN by eliminating unnecessary delays, regulations, taxes, and providing assistance to offset business costs
- Increase awareness of the benefits of business in MN
- Broaden access to start-up capital to encourage innovation and investment
- Increase trade and development opportunities with neighboring states and Canada
- Capitalize on bio-energy to expand and create businesses
- Utilize the knowledge and skills of retirees
- Utilize workforce centers and technology/business incubators

Opportunities in Community Resources:

- Empowering and encouraging new and emerging leadership
- Place-making through arts and culture
- Expand on tourism opportunities
- Promote livability, public spaces, and identity
- Community preservation and enhancement
- Healthy communities

Opportunities in Foundational Assets:

- Expand broadband/fiber footprint in greater MN
- Identify partnerships and resources to maximize infrastructure investment
- Develop public/private partnerships to identify solutions for housing challenges
- Shared services/resources and intergovernmental cooperation

GOAL: Prioritize business development that provides daytime and evening activities for residents

STRATEGY	ACTION
Create more opportunities to recruit local businesses, especially where gaps in existing services exist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work in partnership with Vergas EDA to integrate public feedback into business development and expansion strategies - Host a business & entrepreneurship fair in partnership with Otter Tail County with targeted outreach based on survey results and public input
Increase awareness of state and regional resources for small business owners and entrepreneurs	Score business mentorship program MN DEED resources West Central Initiative Vergas Community Club

	West Central Small Business Development Center Women Venture Otter Tail County Small Business Coaching
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GOAL: Maintain the small business atmosphere

STRATEGY	ACTION
Advertise local businesses regionally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with neighboring Chambers of Commerce to advertise and access resources • Work with the Community Club to identify opportunities and resources to market regionally • Submit stories, ads and updates to surrounding local papers • Invest in enhancing the City's website
Review and update city laws and ordinances that support small business owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserve existing protections • Look into state and federal incentives for small businesses • Research best practices from other communities

GOAL: Develop and Expand Job Opportunities

STRATEGY	ACTION
Maintain and increase the number of visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising businesses and recreational opportunities, and events regionally (see above) • Pursue and invest in trail development • Cultivate more year-round attractions and events
Pursue opportunities for light manufacturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine land available, and interested businesses
Support digital entrepreneurs and remote workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering the Event Center as coworking space by appointment • Maintaining and developing broadband capabilities • Connecting with neighboring communities to participate in county-wide networking opportunities (host pre-existing groups for a meeting)

GOAL: Invest in Human Capital

STRATEGY	ACTION
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Invest in local childcare options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect with Otter Tail County Early Childhood Coordinator to identify needs and resources
Create opportunities for socializing, connecting, and creative placemaking year-round	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve marketing of existing activities Identify gaps in existing community programming and recruit volunteers to host one-off and recurring events Explore development of spaces for families to recreate and youth-specific activities
Provide opportunities for retirees to utilize their knowledge and experience and increase social connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and invite volunteers to join planning and implementation projects

Community Survey Findings:



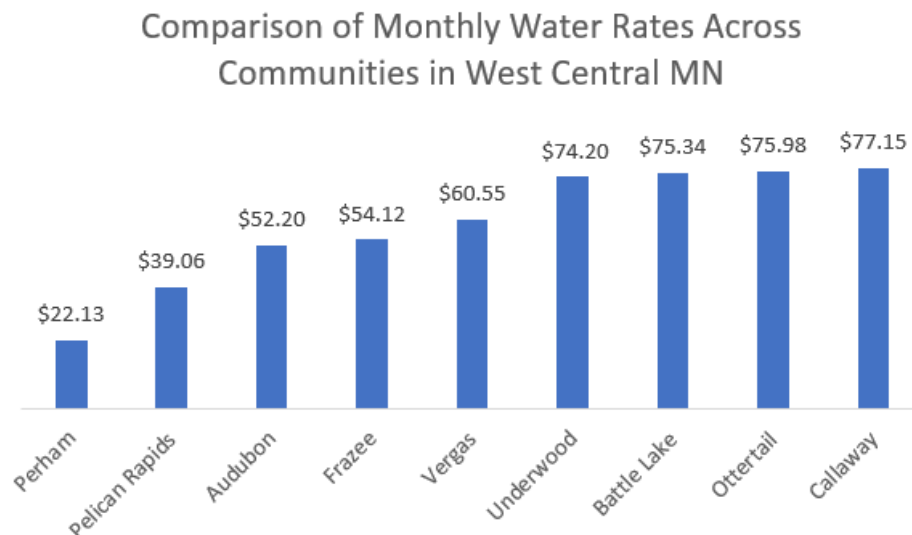
Public Services & Facilities

Overview

Public services and facilities refer to the infrastructure – both hardware and capital assets – such as broadband, street maintenance, stormwater management – that supports the community. For the purposes of this plan, we include both local and regional services such as the bookmobile through the regional library system, transportation assistance, cellular service, and other public utilities. Effective planning around public services and facilities not only considers current demand for services, but anticipates changes driven by development, consumer demand, demographic changes, or other factors.

Current State

As described in the Housing Section, this plan undertook a comparison of the three surrounding townships around Vergas and several cities across the region that represent Vergas' competitors for future residents. The water and sewer rates comparison are discussed in this section. Due to the nature of water and sewer rates in townships, creating an equal comparison of residents in city limits versus out of city limits is fraught with challenges. Therefore, townships were described as 'variable' in the original calculations and are not reflected in the graph below.



Looking at all of the communities included in this comparison, Vergas falls in the mid-range of monthly water rates, with the lowest monthly rate at \$22.13 in Perham and the highest at \$77.15 in Callaway.

Comparison of Monthly Sewer Rates for 2022 in Selected Communities in West Central MN

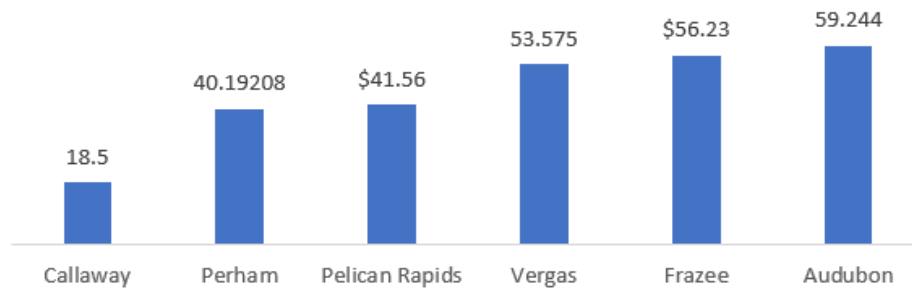


Figure 2. Comparison of Monthly Sewer Rates for 2022 in Selected Communities in West Central MN.

Note: Dora, Candor, and Hobart Townships have such variable septic tank annual costs that they were excluded from this comparison, as well as Ottertail, because it does not have a central sewer system and requires residents to use septic tanks.

Community Survey Findings:

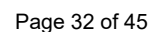
One question in the community survey covered both local and regional services, asking participants to rate them as average, exceptional, or needs improvement. These findings are highlighted below. It is important to note that the City of Vergas staff and its residents, unless actively engaged in regional and state-level planning efforts, may not have much control over regional services. During the writing process, these survey results were shared with respective stakeholders to ensure transparency and offer an opportunity for them to engage with Vergas residents directly, should they choose to do so.

Broadband

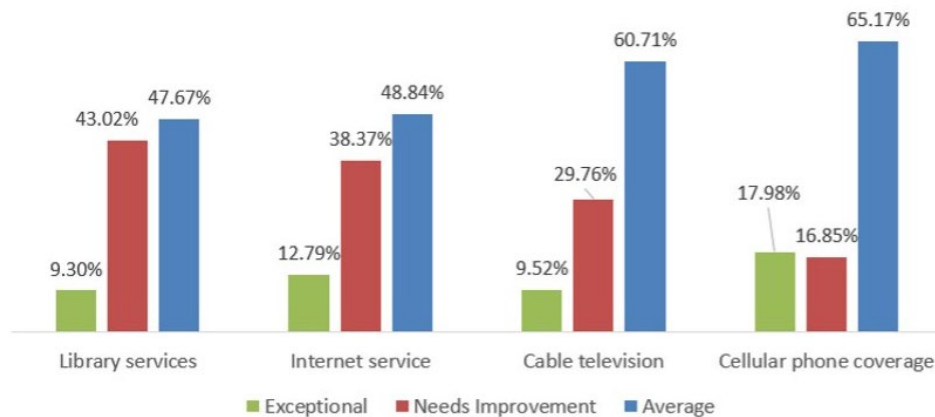
Internet connectivity is a major barrier to economic growth. Vergas is currently served by Arvig, a regional broadband provider, which currently has a monopoly on the market. At the county level, Otter Tail County continues to make investments in broadband access. Vergas is one of 10 locations in the county that recently installed a Smart Room for the public to access wi-fi and virtual meeting technology, located at the Event Center. The Viking Regional library system also has hotspots available for the public to check out for temporary use, which can be accessed via the Book Mobile, which visits the community on a regular basis. The Viking Library System's bookmobile stops at the Vergas Municipal Building every other Thursday from 1:15 pm - 2:15 pm. The Minnesota Office of Broadband created an interactive GIS mapping tool that outlines broadband availability, and while most of the city limits are covered by Cable, Vergas represents a dead zone with regards to fiber optic cable (screenshot below).¹

¹

<https://gis.connectednation.org/portal/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=a2d243ccf7e547eba2ec0d5c80c80917>

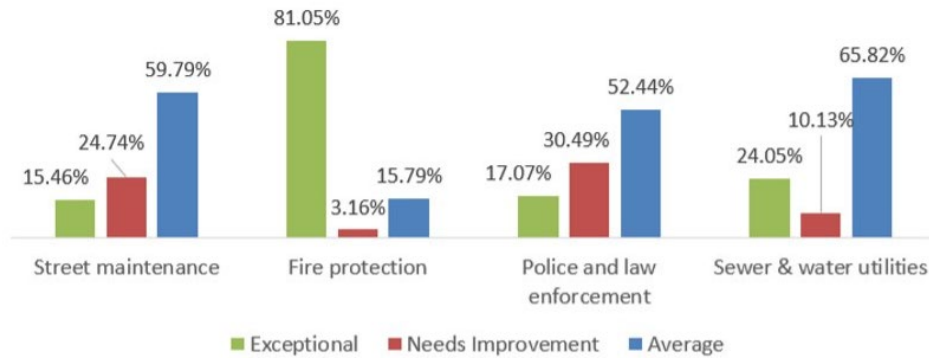


Rate the following regional and local services on
as "Exceptional", "Average", "Needs
improvement" or n/a = "Not applicable".

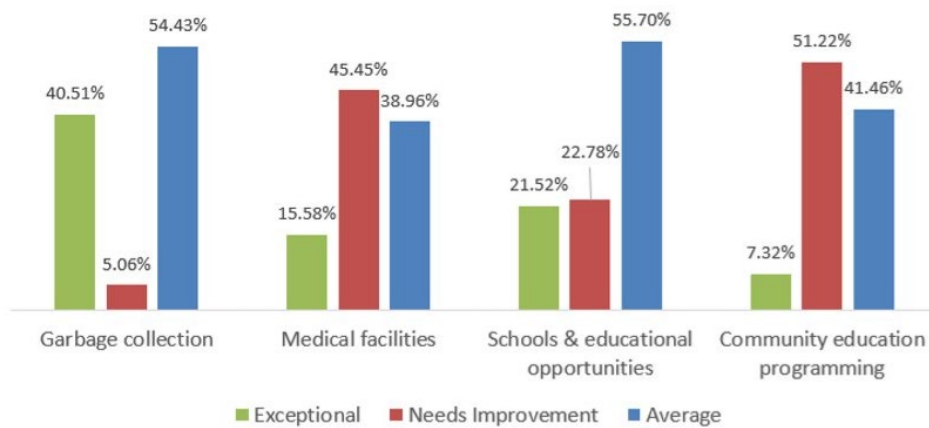


According to the graph above, a little less than half of survey respondents indicated that broadband, or internet service, is 'Average'. About 38% of respondents ranked broadband as 'Needing improvement'. When the survey results were filtered for City of Vergas residents (excluding residents of surrounding townships), the results were nearly identical. While no public engagement activities resulted in a strong outcry for fiber optic cable internet access, this would undoubtedly open more opportunities for residents, visitors, and local business owners.

Rate the following regional and local services on as “Exceptional”, “Average”, “Needs improvement” or n/a = “Not applicable”.

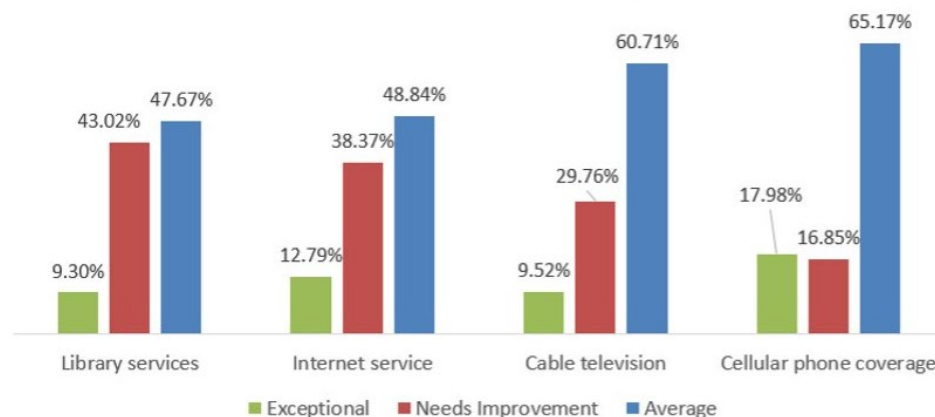


Rate the following regional and local services on as “Exceptional”, “Average”, “Needs improvement” or n/a = “Not applicable”.



As a result of the survey responses to the question about community education programming, we conducted additional engagement at the Maple Syrup Fest. The feedback we received is included in the

Rate the following regional and local services on
as “Exceptional”, “Average”, “Needs
improvement” or n/a = “Not applicable”.



Trends:

The Otter Tail County Long Range Strategic Plan 2040 points to significant efforts underway to address public infrastructure for its residents with the forecasted population and economic growth in mind. At the county level, planners work to increase quality infrastructure access for all with a commitment to fiscal responsibility.

Specifically, transportation and solid waste have their own master plans to ensure resilient and efficient systems within the county. Solid waste management is exploring the “Towards a Zero Landfill” initiative. Otter Tail County also follows their Local Wastewater Management Plan (2014) with efforts to increase wellhead protection and the capacity of septic systems.

GOAL: Maintain adequate public facilities and services to meet the health, safety, education, and leisure needs of all Vergas residents necessary services

STRATEGY	ACTION
Prioritize infrastructure investment based on existing facilities with deficiencies first, replacement and retrofitting of facilities second, and future facility needs third	
Engage in strategic partnerships to ensure that Vergas is identified as a community for investment in fiber optic cable to increase broadband access	
Conduct a needs assessment to understand more about the barriers and opportunities to improve residents’ access to medical facilities (transportation access, awareness, etc.)	

GOAL: Ensure highest quality standards and services for public safety given Vergas' existing resources and staff capacity

STRATEGY	ACTION
Ensure safety of navigation throughout City's streets and sidewalks	Review, update, and publicize the city's planning and zoning maps to accurately indicate which city sidewalks are to be maintained by the city vs. residents
Make Long Lake Park a desirable location for recreation year-round	Renovate and upgrade the public restroom facilities at Long Lake Park Explore opportunities to work with rental company for non-motorized watercraft Consider snowshoe rentals

GOAL: Ensure that services and facilities allow residents and visitors of 55 years or older to age in place.

STRATEGY	ACTION
Ensure safety of navigation throughout City's streets and sidewalks	
Work to develop a full spectrum of transitions in senior housing needs, from accessibility options to access to services and skilled nursing.	

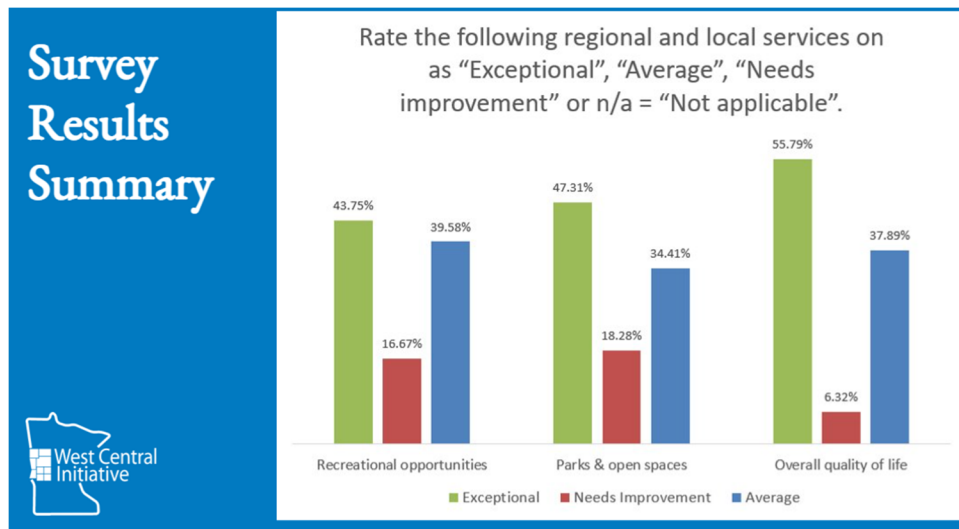
Parks & Open Space

Overview:

The parks & open spaces section of the comprehensive plan focuses on improving opportunities for residents to increase their physical and social well-being within the community. This encompasses parks, state- and federally-owned land, and other open spaces along with community-wide events and activities.

Community Input:

Focus group respondents expressed a desire for outdoor theatre spaces to host cultural events and live music. They also encouraged plans for a pickleball court and frisbee golf course. Increasing parking spaces, updates to restrooms, and making parks and open spaces handicap accessible proved to be a common theme in responses for both old and new spaces and events.



From public engagement at the Maple Syrup Fest on April 9th, 2022, participants indicated an interest in a wide range of community programming and activities that they would like to see at the parks and in open spaces. We asked the following questions and received 7 responses: What would improve your experience with community education programming? What kind of programming would you like to see?

Highlights of the responses include:

- Card/social party
- One-act or short community play/dinner
- Free kittens
- Knitting classes
- Fly-tying class
- Fly fishing class and fly tying
- Broadening use of smart rooms for education

The suggestions are reflected in the goals below, and where they did not fit in this section, are included in Appendix B: Aspirational Projects & Programs.

Current State:

Several stakeholders are collaborating to design and recreate Long Lake Park, one of the most popular outside spaces in the town. The city's 2019 Capital Improvement Plan outlined this project, and the Parks and Rec Board is currently overseeing the design process with students from North Dakota State University.

Trends:

Minnesota's park usage has increased, in line with national trends of park usage as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sales of annual state park permits hit 125,281 through the first half of 2021, according to DNR data, which is significantly higher than in 2020 (100,673 annual permit sales) and 2019 (78,246).² As outdoor recreation becomes a 'safer alternative' to indoor gatherings and spending time in large crowds, Vergas' parks and open space are likely to remain in high demand. The way in which that public space is used, however, could evolve as the demand for hosting more gatherings outside continues to increase.

A more recent trend at the state-level for parks is a move to increase their cultural and physical accessibility. Strategy 4.1 in the MN Department of Natural Resources Strategic Plan from 2011-2022 is to "Develop and promote outdoor recreational opportunities for women and members of racially and ethnically diverse cultures who have not traditionally used DNR facilities and resources." This follows trends of shifting demographics statewide. Given the demographic shifts anticipated in Vergas, with the largest age brackets shifting heavily towards residents in their mid-seventies and eighties, Vergas would benefit from considering investments that allow for intergenerational use of facilities (ex. ADA compliant, caters to both younger and older users) that are accessible for those with mobility challenges while also drawing in younger visitors to encourage an active lifestyle. Part of these efforts can rely on the leadership of Otter Tail County, whose staff are already working to expand the regional trail network to connect existing facilities with destinations throughout the county.

GOAL: Upgrade public facilities at Long Lake City Park

STRATEGY	ACTION
Continue working with North Dakota State University to develop concept designs of Long Lake City Park	
Communicate with county- and regional stakeholders in parks and recreation the desire to pursue state and federal funding	
Follow guidelines and budget in 2019 Capital Improvement Plan for restroom facilities specifications and budget	

² <https://bringmethenews.com/minnesota-lifestyle/minnesotans-after-a-year-cooped-up-inside-flock-to-state-parks-and-campgrounds>

GOAL: Support community art and arts programming

STRATEGY	ACTION
Increase number of displays of interactive art around town, in parks, and open spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create directory of local artists • Continue offering summer youth art camp with display in front of City Hall
Increase community education arts programming	

GOAL: Leverage existing amenities to create a culture that celebrates physical activity and community-based sports that are complementary to school sports schedules

STRATEGY	ACTION
Create opportunities for sports and physical activity education	Examples: Offering lessons for pickleball, classes with local fitness trainers, dance classes
Begin offering adult leagues for baseball/softball	
Explore opportunities for additional recreational space development	Example: Soccer fields, frisbee golf

Resources for Implementation

While it does not make sense to include an exhaustive list of resources that may be available to implement the goals outlined in this plan, one part of the community survey worth noting are the responses to question 17, which asked in what ways residents might be willing to contribute to any changes identified in the comprehensive plan.

How would you be willing to contribute to any changes identified in the comprehensive plan? Please select all that apply.

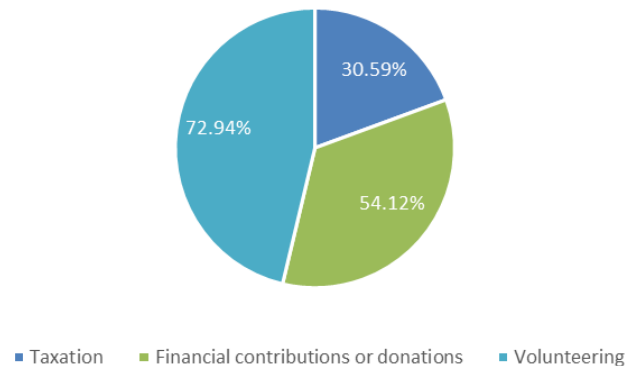


Figure 3. Summary of how survey participants indicated their willingness to contribute changes identified in the comprehensive plan

The pie chart above indicates that almost 73% of survey respondents are willing to volunteer to support community changes, 54% are willing to make financial contributions or donations, and about 30% would be willing to contribute via taxation. This is reflective of the strong culture of volunteerism and ‘everyday philanthropists’ that populate both Vergas the surrounding townships and should be taken into account for ‘in-kind’ contributions and financial support that may be available outside of traditional funding sources.

Appendix A. Tax Comparisons Across Communities

The following graphs were generated from data gathered from Otter Tail and Becker County auditors. The request put in to both auditors was to estimate the property taxes in each community for two different values of homes - \$250K and \$400K. These values were chosen based on the Steering Committee's desire to learn more about the impact of housing affordability across a range that is financially accessible for households of different income levels.

For context, property taxes are calculated based on a combination of fees from the county, the city, the school district, and special taxing districts, such as economic development districts and watershed protection areas. Not all communities included in the comparison area are part of special taxing districts, and recent changes in school district fees will greatly affect this comparison, likely putting these numbers out of date soon after this plan's publication. For example, in 2021, the Frazee school district voted on a referendum to increase the taxes by 50% for the next school year.

Estimated Annual Property Taxes for Homes
Valued at 250K in Selected Communities in
West Central MN

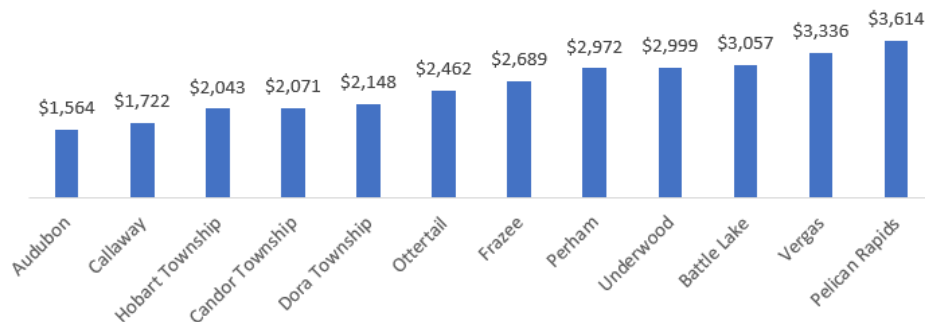


Figure 4. Estimated annual property taxes for homes valued at 250K in selected communities in West Central MN

Note: Several communities included in this comparison had a range of property tax values (Ex. Dora Township has 6 different district codes, which leads to 6 different values when calculating the net tax capacity, and ultimately the property tax). These included Hobart, Candor, and Dora Townships, Ottertail, and Perham.

Figure 4 above indicates that for a town of its size, Vergas is on par with communities of a much larger population - Battle Lake and Pelican Rapids with regards to the property tax values for a home valued at \$250,000.

Estimated Annual Property Taxes for Homes Valued at 400K in Selected Communities in West Central MN

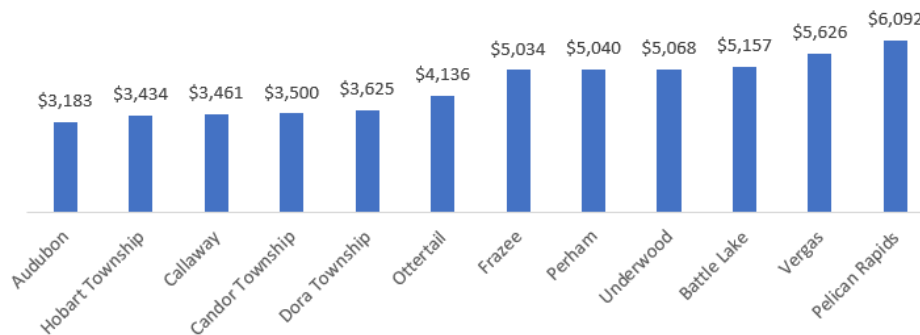


Figure 5. Estimated annual property taxes for homes valued at \$400,000 in selected communities in West Central Minnesota

With the exception the lower end of the spectrum (Audubon, Hobart Township, Callaway, and Candor Township), the rest of the comparison at the \$400,000-level are consistent with the findings of the previous graph.

City-provided utilities and services

The graphs below describe the differences in the utility costs for residents in Hobart, Dora, and Candor Township, as well as Pelican Rapids, Audubon, Callaway, Frazee, Underwood, Ottertail, and Battle Lake. These communities were chosen for their geographic location as well as from recommendations from the steering committee as communities that are seen as Vergas' competitors for attracting new residents. Reasons for this include population size, lake access, recreational opportunities, and proximity to other regional destinations, such as the state parks.

Note: It was nearly impossible to compare the Townships against the utility costs of the other cities due to the nature of private wells and septic systems having such variability in their cost for initial installation/drilling, as well as maintenance over time. The geography of each property dictates how deep a well must be built, and the water quality of the area dictates how much filtration and water softening is needed. As such, determining a blanket estimate would be flawed on many levels; therefore, for the purposes of this comparison, they are described as 'variable' in the following graphs and tables.

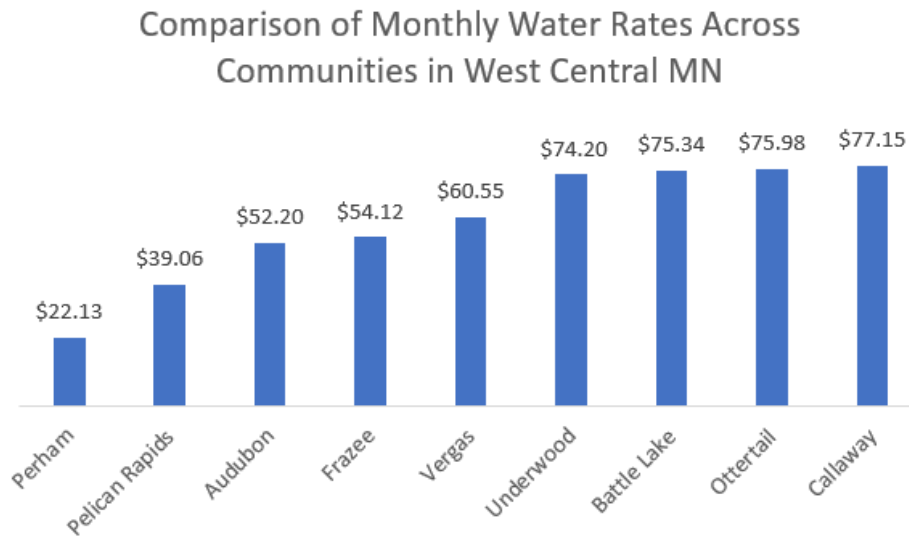


Figure 6.

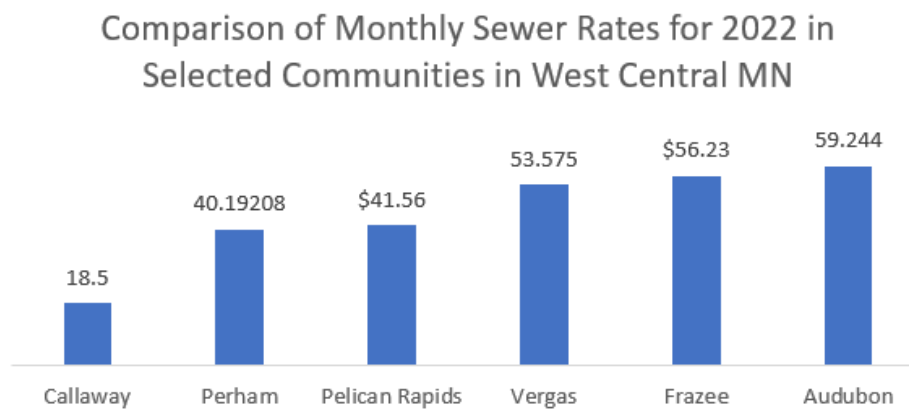


Figure 7. Comparison of Monthly Sewer Rates for 2022 in Selected Communities in West Central MN.

Note: Dora, Candor, and Hobart Townships have such variable septic tank annual costs that they were excluded from this comparison, as well as Ottertail, because it does not have a central sewer system and requires residents to use septic tanks.

Monthly Waste Collection & Recycling Rates for 2022 in Selected Communities in West Central MN

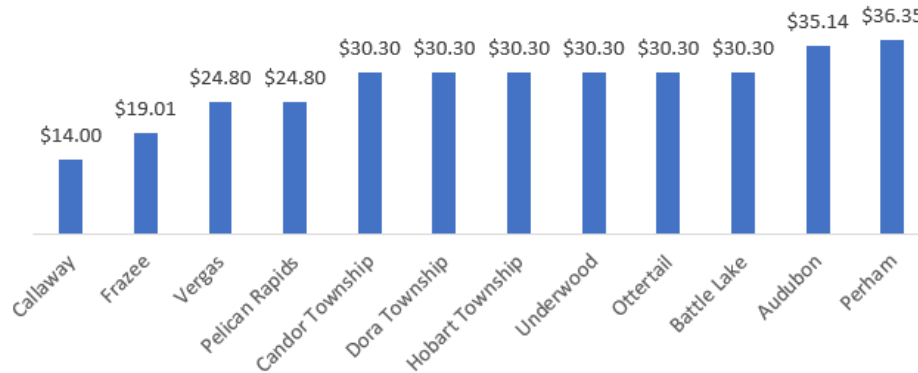


Figure 8. Monthly Waste Collection & Recycling Rates for 2022 in Selected Communities in West Central MN

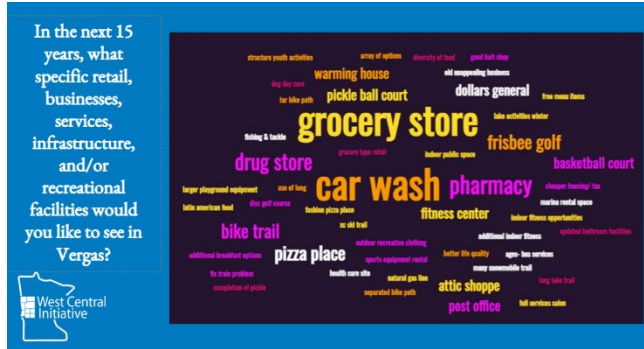
Note: Vergas offers both composting and recycling bins for residents but does not charge for this service. Pelican Rapids also offers recycling drop off bins through Otter Tail County but does not charge an additional recycling fee. Estimates for waste collection fees were based on a 65-gallon bin per household, with pricing estimates for townships and communities without a city-led service coming from providers servicing these communities: Steve's Sanitation and Ballard's Sanitation.

A note on stormwater fees

Of all the communities in this comparison, only two charge a specific storm water fee to residents – Perham, at \$1.75/month and Frazee at \$1.25/month. In other communities, these fees often show up in property taxes through the calculation of net tax capacity rate. Because there were so few communities that charge this fee, and due to how nominal of a month charge it is, specific comparison charts were not generated for this element of 'fixed costs'.

Appendix B. Aspirational Projects & Programs

The following list of projects and programs draws on the community survey findings and are captured here to ensure that the community's aspirations are not lost and can be a reference for future development projects.



RECREATIONAL & COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES

- Disc golf course
- Walking trail to Trowbridge Zoo
- Fishing pier
- Waterslide
- Pickleball
- Badminton
- Public bikes in summer
- Snow shoeing in winter
- Yoga
- Baseball games
- Club sports for young adults in evening
- Monthly clubs (writing, knitting, crafts)
- Splash pad
- Farmers market
- Theatre group
- Outdoor exercise stations along trail
- Yoga studio and climbing/bouldering wall
- Community garden
- Edible landscaping around town
- Indoor fitness opportunities

RETAIL/COMMERCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

- Grocery store
- Carwash
- Laundromat
- Small storage rental units

- Toy store
- Bakery
- Pharmacy/Drug store
- Farmers market
- History museum
- Pop-up shop style retail
- Rooftop entertainment areas
- Brewery and/or distillery
- Pizza place
- Sports equipment rental & outdoor recreation clothing
- Dog day care
- Fishing & tackle/bait shop
- Marina rental space
- Seasonal menus