



McCook and Surrounding Communities

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NE CARES COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSION

This report serves to document and summarize the main themes discussed at the NE CARES Community Listening Session, held on May 8th 2023 at the McCook Community Hospital in McCook, NE.

Participants included representatives from the following organizations and agencies

- Community Hospital and Foundation
- McCook Public Schools
- Southwest Nebraska Public Health District
- McCook Community Foundation
- NE Extension
- UNL

SUMMARY

Participants reported that McCook and surrounding communities are great places to live with a small-town feel and amenities of a larger community. Participants described McCook as a safe, values-oriented, and family-friendly community. The school and community hospital are two important hubs for the community and serve many purposes beyond education and health. The arts are also a large part of the culture of McCook. There are coordinated efforts to work together including the Philanthropy Council, and participants reported that people show up for each other, creating a sense of “all in it together.” Participants discussed housing, childcare, lack of healthcare for the uninsured, low population, and lack of broadband as challenges.

Participants voiced ways UNL could partner with McCook and surrounding communities by helping find dental care for uninsured children, helping create a creative district, service learning, researching why people move to McCook and why do they stay, and where are there opportunities for youth voice and leadership?

THEME ONE: PEOPLE ATTRACTION AND RETENTION

Participants reported several interrelated challenges to economic growth and positive change in McCook and surrounding areas. These include: affordable housing, childcare, broadband, workforce, and a lack of healthcare for uninsured families.

Participants reported several challenges to attracting and retaining working adults and young families. First, described a lack of housing of all kinds and price points. They noted that it is difficult to find housing for new hires as demand outstrips supply. Participants reported a lack of skilled construction workers in the area and the higher cost of materials in the area, driving up the costs of new housing.

In addition to housing, participants reported it is hard to attract new workers to the area as it can be difficult for spouses to find work in McCook. Participants also noted a lack of childcare also contributes to workforce attraction, as does limited reliable broadband internet, which makes it challenging for people to live in the area and work remotely.

Second, participants reported that young adults with trade skills are often “poached” by employers in eastern Nebraska who can pay more than those in McCook. To remedy this challenge, participants collectively identified need for career pathways that include trades, as well as education and medical fields, including mentoring and apprenticeships.

Third, participants described a desire for every family to have what they needed to raise their family, to decrease Adverse Childhood Events, and to have mental health, dental care, and eye care for uninsured children and the population in general, and to stay in the McCook area, leading to stability in the region.

Figure 1 McCook listening session



THEME TWO: OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

In addition to the challenges identified previous, participants identified opportunities for growth. Growth of the community, and by extension, expansion of the tax base, was identified by participants as one of their hopes and dreams for McCook.

Participants identified a vacant floor of an old hotel building downtown as a place to potentially develop housing for medical residents, student teachers, and other young adults seeking to enter medical and educational professions in town. One participant expressed a desire to recruit more international doctors and teachers and to create cultural bridges that would help these individuals stay in the community. Embracing diversity was also mentioned as a way to provide young people with experiences that would support development to navigate the military and other opportunities beyond Southwest Nebraska.

Participants also identified the need to embrace cultural diversity as a strategy for attracting and retaining immigrants. This was paired with a desire to attract and retain a “working class that want to work,” particularly those with the skills to work in a variety of fields beyond retail.

Figure 2: McCook listening session



Visions for growth included a the bond issue that will fund a new pool and baseball field, and then the next bond issue will fund a remodel of the jr. high school. The McCook Community Foundation is also working on a Southwestern Creative District, that could possibly support an artist in residence program, maker’s spaces, and concert series. Participants reiterated that they wanted every person to reach their full potential, and the infrastructure to support them.

THEME THREE: UNL AS A PARTNER

When asked how UNL could partner with the communities in the area, many suggestions were put forward, including

- Bringing out dental college students to do cleanings
- Having the Architecture College visit the Frank Lloyd Wright House
- Training for county attorneys on student truancy and parenting
- Helping increase the mental health infrastructure

- Placemaking
- Farm succession
- Parenting classes
- Retaining and retraining staff, teachers specifically
- More service learning to get UNL students into their communities
- Helping create a ratio that considers cost of living index and area household income to create a more accurate measure of comparison between communities
- Studying why people have moved to McCook from other places, and especially, why have they stayed?
- Help develop opportunities for youth voice and leadership (e.g., youth participatory action research).
- Youth participatory research in the high school.

NEXT STEPS

- Heidi Wheeler has volunteered to be part of the NE CARES Steering Committee
- The NE CARES team and NE Extension will continue to act as connectors for ideas from the communities to UNL. Please reach out as you continue to have ideas!

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