

Visioning 2026, Tourism/Recreation Focus Group

November 16, 2006

6:30—9:00 p.m.

City Council Chambers

Attendees: Diane Becker, Connie Geary, Cheryl Johnson, Charles Kathurima, Brandon Maly, Karen Snoke, Stan Staab, Mark Hall, Mike Brogan, Lora Young, and Jennifer Adams. (Pam Carlson, Reporter)

Brogan gave participants a brief summary of the Visioning 2026 process and asked the group to introduce themselves. Group was then asked to review the 16 trends previously identified as likely to affect Northeast Nebraska in the next couple of decades.

Group was asked:

- 1) Of the trends listed, identify the five trends most likely to impact on tourism and recreation.
- 2) How will these trends affect tourism and recreation?
- 3) What other trends or weak signals do we see now that will cause us to alter the ways we think about tourism and recreation?
- 4) What problems or pitfalls might those in tourism and recreation anticipate having to deal with because of these trends?

Discussion was made on the 16 trends and group also considered the other given questions. After an hour and a half, group identified the following five trends (of the 16 considered) as being the most likely to impact tourism/recreation in our area during the next 20 years:

- 1) (3) Global Economy and Internet
- 2) (5) Virtual Workforce/Work Place/Life Style Changes
- 3) (7) Transportation and Accessibility
- 4) (8) Health and Medical Trends
- 5) (9) Communications and Innovation Network

Transportation and Accessibility—we need a four-lane highway system, and an airport with some commuter capacity. The planned expressway infrastructure could be in place by 2026. However, some feel communities on the interstate actually see less tourism because traffic moves so fast and people do not want to slow down until they get to their ultimate destination. How do we become a destination? People may not want to go out of their way to come here unless we offer multiple reasons to entice travelers to our area. There is a need to attract a diverse population of tourists. Once here, ease of access throughout our area (both in Norfolk, and in a 50 mile radius around Norfolk) needs to be considered as well. Local public transportation is needed now and will be needed more in the future. Earlier this year, the City of Norfolk posted results of a long-term public transportation plan for Norfolk. [See www.ci.norfolk.ne.us/planningzoning/transportation_plan_2030.htm]

To attract tourists to our area, we need better signage leading them to the special interest sites. Current signage is inadequate—they are small, not very visible, and there are not enough of them to assist in locating the sites. Norfolk needs a more welcoming and attractive entrance to the city limits. Also, is there a need for a 24/7 information center to provide visitors to Norfolk with information and tourist brochures? This would not have to be a large facility.

Global Economy and Internet—more and more people are online today—how do we empower our community to greater use of this mode of communication? At the same time, how do we lure our

youth away from their computer video games and back to outdoor activities (not just organized sports)? How can we better use the internet to advertise recreation options in our area?

Virtual Workforce/Workplace/Life Style Changes—The latest trend in travel is the short, eight-hour day trip. It is becoming more and more common for families, including extended family members, to travel and vacation together. Multi-generational needs will need to be considered for future tourism.

Health and Medical Trends—Baby boomers seem to prefer social activities, whereas genXers and the millennials would rather get away from work to enjoy staying home with family or simply escape into their computers and video games. To make Norfolk and Northeast Nebraska a destination for the whole family, we need to consider all ideas for attractions, whether at first they might be considered good or bad.

Group was asked: what can we do with the natural resources of our area? Can we use the natural flow of the river through town to create a “Riverwalk”? Flood controls are in place. How can we use the history of the river, and the Mill, and Johnson’s Park? Can we perhaps turn back the hands of time and restore it to what it was in earlier times? The city and the NRD own a lot of the land along the river bed between Benjamin Avenue and Norfolk Avenue. Is grant funding available to revitalize the area, making it a focal point? Probably not currently, due to the expensive war on terrorism. However, the political climate in Washington is changing, as evidenced by the recent election results, so perhaps grant funding options will improve in the not so distant future.

Birding is a growing trend in tourism in Northeast Nebraska—the Elkhorn Valley Museum has just acquired an excellent bird library, one of the best in the subject area. Other natural resources—it is easy to leave the city and see nature, the stars, enjoy the lakes and hiking/biking trails, etc. Consider putting it together as a destination package for local tourism promotion. The package could be ideal for anyone living within an eight hour day trip. We can also use our “western culture” to promote us more broadly, even globally—this is a fun and relaxing place for the family and full of history.

Further brainstorming—What about creating something new to the area, such as a Science Fiction Center? Discussion was made about what type of building would be needed, what would the center have of interest to the tourist—artifacts, futuristic technology? Or, it was suggested we could develop a biblical theme park such as “Holy Land.” People would not have to travel overseas; they could come here and experience the different periods of Christianity, as well as other religions, such as Judaism, Buddhism, etc. Is there a need to include the agriculture industry—can we use a farming theme to create some type of agri-business tourism attraction?

These days tourists a desire accommodations that include the bed and breakfast option. The local hotel industry should welcome this development, as it ultimately will increase their own business (patrons of B&B’s are different from those seeking hotels and motels). The bed and breakfast tourist looks for a slower paced, centrally located place to stay.

We need to expand our promotion communications to a 50-60 mile radius to become the regional tourism hub. This would enable communication with our neighboring communities and improve our economic development image, encouraging prospective businesses to come to our area, thus creating wealth for further development of recreation for the area.

The Ponca Tribe purchased the Nebraska Christian College. What are their plans for the land—can we work with them to create an attraction of some sort there and enlist the native American culture? We favor the creation of new festivals, such as a Johnny Carson Comedy Festival. Current obstacles with festivals are in getting the businesses that benefit most from them to financially back them. Ideally, festivals should be self-supporting and they should have quality exhibit and entertainers to draw the public

Johnny Carlson's boyhood home—what are the possibilities there? Can we create a tourist attraction, or at least a defined point of interest, considering parking and the residents in the area? If we do not promote Norfolk's most famous citizen, will our children remember who he was and what he meant to America?

[Group took a 10 minute break at this point.]

Outcome Segment:

Upon return, group focused on the following two questions:

(1) Can you identify the top two or three actions or accomplishments in tourism/recreation that citizens of Norfolk and Northeast Nebraska should undertake to best benefit from and take advantage of these five trends? (2) Specifically, what changes should we make to our local tourism and recreation systems to make us "world class" and set us apart from other areas and cities?

Norfolk Riverwalk as a "Theme Park"—Group became increasingly intrigued with the idea of developing downtown Norfolk and the "North Fork of the Elkhorn River" as focal points to draw tourists to our area. The idea is to clean up the North Fork river channel and create a Riverwalk along the channel. San Antonio has an old Riverwalk, but it is too narrow for anything other than walking traffic. Bismarck, ND, allows pedestrians and bicyclists on their newer, wider Riverwalk. There could be a pedestrian bridge system so people can wander from one side of the Riverwalk to the other. The bridges could be a focal point themselves—decorate them, use a variety of cultures for each bridge, a German bridge, a Czech bridge, a Hispanic bridge, etc, to include all the ethnic diversity of our area. Connect the Riverwalk to a waterpark near the YMCA. The waterpark could be used year around if it has a bubble dome that is retractable when summer arrives. This could make a waterpark more economical for the area and help pay for itself sooner. Could utilize unused NPS Middle School parking lot to accommodate summer tourism. Connect all this with a trail system that would eventually join with the Cowboy Trail. Develop biking and walking trails throughout the city that are wide enough to keep people safely on the trails and off the roads. Boulder, CO, has an excellent city trail system. Consider having bikes available in the downtown to use as needed free of charge. Try to persuade Henningsen Foods to move to a more appropriate place for the company. Add new businesses to downtown, such as a microbrewery. Use our German heritage (or take a multicultural angle) and develop stores and store fronts that showcase that heritage. Revitalize and restore Johnson's Park to the way it was in the 1940's and 1950's, making it another destination for tourists. Rebuild the bandstand and stage big band, jazz and Christmas concerts.

The City of Norfolk AS the theme park...why build something from scratch when we can create something unique with what we have and expand on it? How do we get the community behind this concept?

Summarization of outcome discussion:

- 1) Continue revitalization of downtown Norfolk and develop a Riverwalk is a top priority.
- 2) Norfolk as the "Theme Park" using the diversity of our historical culture and natural resources.
- 3) Develop a master plan for tourism and recreation for the future, to include the Cowboy trail. Also include the regional expansion of our communication technology. We may need to hire a tourism consultant and/or create a community-wide task force to implement these ideas.

The next step in the visioning process is to have the core group of Visioning 2026 analyze all the information generated by the different focus groups and present it to the public in a poll some time next spring. Group was thanked for their participation and the meeting was adjourned.