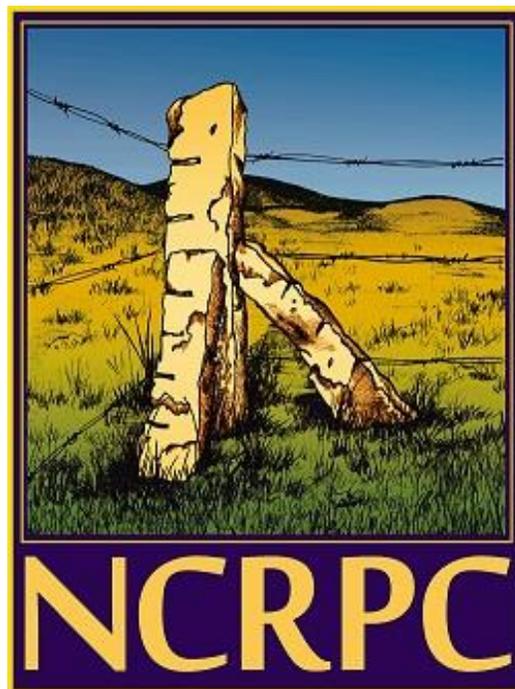


# North Central Regional Planning Commission 2023 Strategic Plan

An Organizational Review After 50 years of Operational History  
...And Plans for Moving Forward



August 2023

This plan was made possible through the generous support of the Dane Hansen Foundation which is committed to making the communities of Northwest Kansas better places to live.

Plan developed by:  
John R. Cyr  
Beloit, KS

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary	5
Introduction	6
NCRPC Overview	8
Creation / Genesis of the Organization	8
Organizational History & Accomplishments	9
Organizational Structure & Original Purpose	9
Growth of Programmatic Initiatives & Key Accomplishments	10
Current Status	13
Review of Survey Responses	15
SWOT Analysis	17
Path Forward	19
Mission Statement	19
Review of Current Staffing / Board Make-up / Programs Relative to the Mission	20
Current Board Make-up	20
Current Staffing	20
What current programs to expand, continue, or phase out	21
New programmatic areas to support mission	22
Board growth, sustainability, and diversification	26
Revenue growth, sustainability, and diversification	28
Organizational Culture	29
Opportunities for partnerships and multi-regional initiatives	31
Metrics, reporting, etc.	32
Appendix “A” – 2023 Strategic Plan Dashboard	34
Appendix “B” – Client Markets / Services Dashboard Concept	35
Appendix “C” – Board / Staff Orientation Dashboard Concept	36
Appendix “D” – NCRPC Production Dashboard Example	37
Notes	38

**Illustrations**

Graph: NCK Jobs and Population Change	6
Map: 1971 Executive Order – Original Planning Regions	8
Illustration: NCRPC Organization Model	9
Illustration: Regional Development Organization	13
Table: Predicted Impact of AI on Job Sectors	24
Illustration: Functional Operation Model	29
Illustration: Network Operation Model	29
Illustration: Service Components	30
Illustration: NCRPC Potential as Hub Organization	32

## Executive Summary

Fifty years ago, eight counties in North Central Kansas jointly formed a Commission to create studies and review plans concerning the region's future development. This collaborative effort was driven not only by the desire to advance planning practices but also to foster multi-jurisdictional cooperation aimed at preventing costly mistakes and duplication of efforts. The name adopted by the agency was the North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC) with it being one of thirteen such organizations established in Kansas during that period.

This initiative was the outgrowth of federal and state policies that emphasized the significance of involving local governments in project planning. The idea arose from the conservative belief that local officials were best positioned to understand the needs of their communities and then devise reasonable solutions. And while the formation of the Commission was not without controversy, once operational, members quickly recognized its potential in helping them access funding and facilitating project implementation.

That realization marked the beginning of the organization's evolution. Over the next five decades, the NCRPC transformed from being a single-function agency into a network-based, multi-tasking organization. Its board-sanctioned work program now addresses the needs of four distinct regional markets:

- Member county and city governments: infrastructure planning, project funding, and oversight.
- Consumer Groups (e.g., state agencies, nonprofit agencies, social organizations, interest groups): meeting facilitation, program/project development/implementation, and training.
- Private Enterprise: business finance.
- Individual residents: housing rehabilitation, weatherization, demolition, and acquisition.

This breakdown explains the arena in which the NCRPC operates, enhancing its transparency while focusing attention on avenues which may produce future service development. This is particularly true if the focus is further refined by resident needs. While infrastructure remains a priority for NCRPC members, all subsequent activities performed by NCRPC staff are centered on fulfilling these resident needs:

- Affordable housing that meets standard code.
- Products or services necessary for maintaining residential and business property.
- Facilities that sustain adequate rural healthcare and support services.
- Quality job opportunities requiring business service support and sound infrastructure.

But the effectiveness of the NCRPC as a *regional planning and development organization* remains contingent upon the latitude its members grant the Commission, how they see it as an entity unto itself, and how they define “regional development”. While the staff has been given the flexibility to serve a wider clientele than just the membership itself, the NCRPC remains constrained by the expectations expressed in its by-laws. The parameters expressed in that document fail to acknowledge the NCRPC is no longer just an organization that reviews plans or uses programs structured by others to meet member needs. Now, it is fully capable of creating its own if given sufficient political autonomy and funding support. That is where the NCRPC is today. Its working knowledge of North Central Kansas culture and community structure has placed it in a position to play a larger role than just that of a planning organization. What remains is for this to be openly acknowledged as its operating procedure.

## Introduction

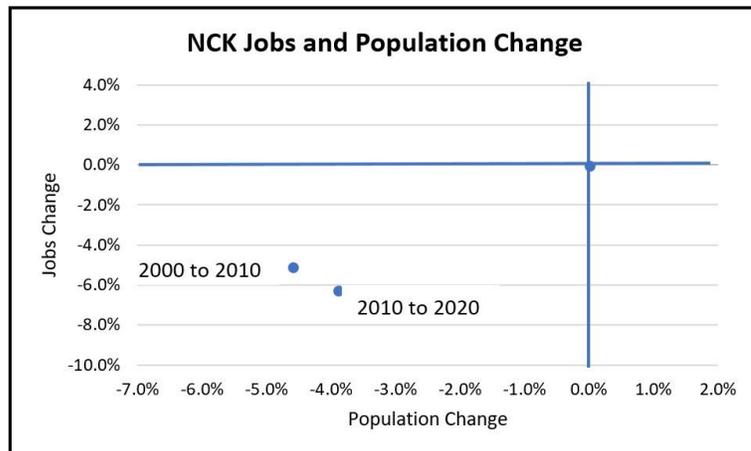
All organizations must periodically evaluate their mission (philosophy) against their procedures (methodology) to determine if those two operational components remain in alignment given the mission sets the stage for anticipated behavior, while the procedures reflect actual performance. Such a review is especially justified for older organizations, as the services they now provide may no longer fully reflect their original purpose.

There are various ways to conduct the evaluation with the creation of a "strategic plan" being one effective exercise. Strategic plans in the past were used by organizations to define their mission within the context of a specific market. They achieved this by breaking down the target and identifying areas where they could use their capabilities to achieve a specified outcome. These plans determined how skill sets were to be applied and set objective milestones to measure progress towards mission success. Unfortunately, once completed, they often ended up as documents on a shelf, growing more outdated and remote with each passing day.

But things have changed. Today, such plans set the backdrop organizations use to navigate the environment they serve. They focus everyone’s attention on a unified goal, essentially becoming a real-time reference guide which dynamic organizations use to characterize the markets they serve, to formulate their services, and to mark progress made along the path to fulfilling their mission.

The NCRPC’s desire to undergo such a review is timely, considering the growing need for regional coordination and cooperation in service delivery. North Central Kansas is one of the more rural parts of the state, covering over 8,500 square miles with an average community size of roughly 1,750 residents across its twelve (12) counties. The counties and communities remain independent in their operations, so cooperative ventures have not been a priority. However, it is evident from the data that more attention to this idea should be considered.

In the past two decades, this area of Kansas has experienced combined losses in both jobs and population, according to U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis data. No location was immune. For instance, between 2000-10, Dickinson and Saline counties saw job gains but suffered population losses, while Clay, Ellsworth, and Mitchell counties gained population but lost jobs. For the next decade, 2010-20, only Washington County saw any gain, but that was limited to jobs only. These collective losses in both categories reduced the critical mass (e.g., tax base, workforce, basic support services) necessary for individual locations to respond to their development needs effectively. Regional action is thus not only important but also necessary.



The NCRPC’s interest in developing a strategic plan is also coming at a time when it is increasingly apparent the advent of information technology has changed and continues to change the working environment.

Previously seen as the go-to place for answers and assistance, the NCRPC must now contend with the fact that people can find potential solutions for their needs on the internet and access self-help videos. This trend was further exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 shutdown, where individuals were forced to address their own needs rather than relying on external assistance. While this newfound self-reliance is locally beneficial, it has reintroduced a siloed mindset to community development, which must be considered in the creation and deployment of services by regional agencies like the NCRPC.

Moreover, the functional purpose of regional organizations like the NCRPC is sometimes challenging to understand. This was highlighted in a 1999 assessment based on the Myers-Briggs classification system, which noted following:

*“While a stable organization, the basic stability and reliability of the organization's functional systems - which it creates and protects quite unselfconsciously - is magnified by the fact the organization is likely to be rather closed to outsiders. Deep down, the organization considers it in bad taste to brag or toot its own horn. For that reason, its power is sometimes underestimated by those not in the know.”<sup>1</sup>*

Much of that narrative remains true today for few people outside the office have a complete understanding of just how the NCRPC operates or what it does and therein lies an inherent danger. Such lack of transparency may explain why there appears to be diminishing member interest in the NCRPC and its operation. It may also mean the organization has become too comfortable with established procedure and is failing to continually explain its role in today's community and economic development environment. But all of that does not negate the organization's latent ability, it just requires those involved to adjust to the new demand.

This strategic plan will trace the organization's evolution and conclude by suggesting a future goal that brings into focus the ultimate purpose of all staff activity. The plan will further seek to expand everyone's thinking about roles and responsibilities, encouraging all participants to envision the future rather than constantly trying to recreate the past. Ultimately, the plan will strive to answer these fundamental questions:

- What is the NCRPC as an organization – who owns it, who controls it?
- What is the NCRPC's ultimate purpose – what does it do, what is its principal goal?
- What are the respective roles of the members, their representatives, and staff?
- What does the future hold for the NCRPC – what must be done to ensure on-going success?

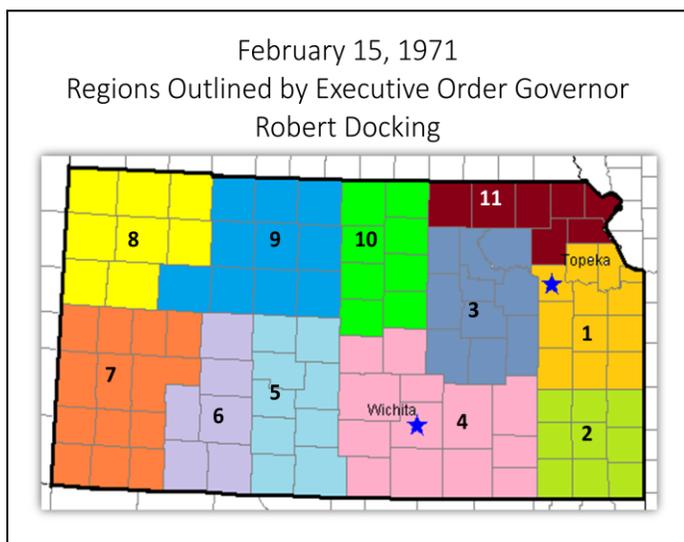
## NCRPC Overview

Growth of federal and state policy in the 1960s regarding regional planning and development as a practice resulted in the creation of organizations like the North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC). The context within which that occurred and what resulted is briefly described here.

### Creation / Genesis of the organization

Kansas began to seriously consider a regional approach to problem-solving and program delivery in 1966 when it launched a series of agency studies intent on defining substate areas based on shared commonalities. The necessary legal measures describing a regional organization's structure and operation (K.S.A. 12-716 et seq. and K.S.A. 12-2901 et seq.) had been set in place in 1957 but no attempt had been made at either the state or local level to implement such a system. The impetus for that came from the federal level with passage of the Public Works & Economic Development Act of 1965 and the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act of 1968. The former created the Economic Development Administration which provided local governments with a source of planning money while the latter enabled governors to create substate regions and then grant them whatever authority the governor felt appropriate.

That set the stage for issuance of an Executive Order (EO) by Governor Robert Docking in 1971 entitled *"Relating to the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act of 1968, Public Law 90-577, and the Establishment of Planning and Development Districts within the State of Kansas"*. Using details found within the previous agency studies, the EO identified eleven (11) county groups predicated on described characteristics (human, physical, economic, and settlement patterns) under the assumption the counties in each such group shared a natural working relationship. These county clusters were then encouraged to form a regional planning and development commission to further local cooperation and to perform project reviews in accordance with OMB Circular A-95, another federal program. The EO further urged, but did not mandate, all executive branch agencies within Kansas government to *"...take the regional alignment into consideration..."* when establishing or delivering state programs. Later experience showed most such agencies did not, for while the state activated the system, it did not commit itself to the system.



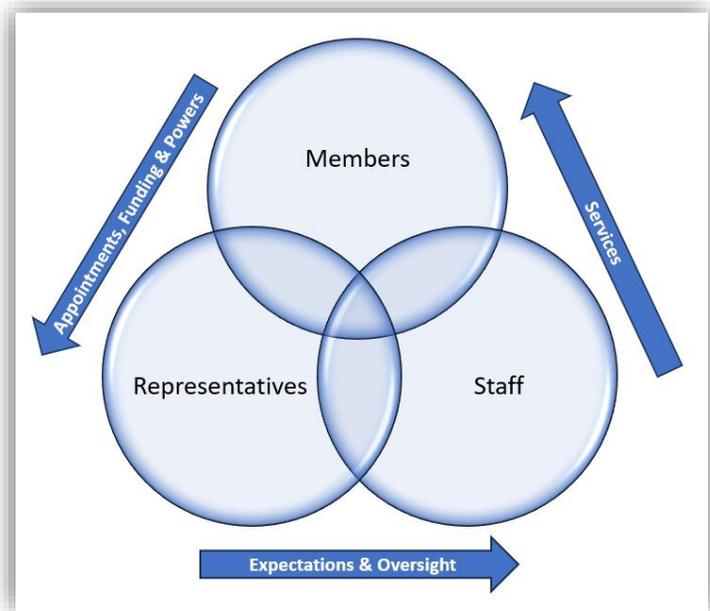
Local governments were given little state guidance or support in the follow up as to what regional planning commissions or regional councils were to (or could) do. Several publications produced by the Kansas Department of Economic Development (KDED) gave the counties an academic explanation of their purpose but little else in terms of practical advice. There was no further discussion about operational logistics or inter-agency cooperation beyond that described in law and the EO. Local governments were thus left on their own to explore ways such an organization could be effectively utilized.

## Organizational History & Accomplishments

In operation now for over fifty (50) years, the NCRPC has quietly grown to assume a much larger role in the region’s development than the founders envisioned.

### Organizational structure and original purpose

Responding to the Governor’s EO, eight (8) counties in North Central Kansas set up a Regional Planning Commission in 1972. They did so in accordance with state planning law (K.S.A. 12-716 et seq.) and by signing an interlocal agreement (K.S.A. 12-2901 t seq.) that spelled out the organization’s function and purpose. The model that developed is illustrated in the graphic on the right. It features three component parts with the principal responsibilities of each explained by the arrows. As such, the Commission was then and remains today *a function of local government* defined by its members with no corporate standing although it is frequently seen and treated as a nonprofit entity.



The language of the interlocal agreement was vague in terms of specifying actions the Commission was to carry out other than producing studies and plans. Its role was envisioned to be more observational than action oriented as expressed here:

*“...to make those studies and plans for the development of the region that will guide the unified development of the region, eliminate planning duplication and promote economy and efficiency in the coordinated development of the region and the general welfare and prosperity of its people.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Each participating county or city was expected to appoint one (1) representative to the Commission for every 10,000 residents or fraction thereof. The representatives, approximately fifty-four (54) in total and all elected officials, constituted the General Board. An Executive Board of twelve (12) people was then selected from the General Board.

Revenue for the budget included a HUD-sponsored planning grant passed through the state plus dues from the members. The dues were annually determined based on budget demands with each county and city paying a minimum of \$25.00 per year. The remainder was to be covered using a 50-50 ratio that proportionately reflected each county’s population and valuation. After that, each county was to determine how its dues responsibility was to be *“...divided among the cities within the county and the county government.”<sup>iii</sup>*

The Commission then hired an initial staff of three (3) people – a director, a planner, and a secretary/bookkeeper. Operations were set up in the basement of the Beloit Municipal Building where they remained until 1986 when the Commission, by then more generally known as the “NCRPC”, moved into a storefront in downtown Beloit. That made the organization publicly visible for the first time plus ended the general perception it was somehow a part of Beloit city government.

#### Growth of programmatic initiatives and key accomplishments

It is important to acknowledge the organization’s capabilities have ebbed and flowed with staff changes. 1970s operations grew from three (3) employees to twenty-two (22) by 1980, the majority (17) of whom were associated with the weatherization program. That total number had fallen to five (5) when the move to Main Street occurred. Today, NCRPC employs nineteen (19) staff, seven (7) of whom are with weatherization. All staff activity over the past 50 years can be categorized as follows.

##### ➤ Planning

The NCRPC began operations by producing multiple housing plans between 1972 and 1982 along with one land use plan in 1976. This activity was paid for by member dues and a grant from the Kansas Department of Economic Development (KDED). This latter source was the HUD 701 program, a product of the federal Housing Act of 1954 with Kansas providing the required 10% match. That program was eliminated in the early 1980s. Once that program vanished, so did the Kansas matching funds which broke the connection, limited as it was, between the state and all regional planning organizations.

But another source of annual planning support was available through the Economic Development Administration (EDA), U.S. Department of Commerce. NCRPC became a “designated” Economic Development District (EDD) in 1982, receiving full authorization as an EDD in 1990 which it has maintained for the past thirty-three years. This program requires the NCRPC to produce an annually updated five-year economic development plan, identifying regional needs and a work program that addresses those needs.

##### ➤ OMB Circular A-95 Review

A-95, a circular of the Office of Management and Budget in the 1970s, mandated all projects requesting federal assistance undergo regional review and many regional planning commissions in Kansas, the NCRPC being one, sought and received A-95 review authority from the governor. The rationale behind the circular was local officials were better positioned to recognize project need and then coordinate service delivery.

Between 1973 and 1982 all federal funding requests concerning projects within NCRPC territory came to the NCRPC for approval before they were further processed. But like HUD 701, the A-95 review process was terminated in 1983 at the federal level which led state application of the system to follow suit shortly thereafter. Consequently, two foundational elements (in-house planning and A-95 review) of NCRPC operations were gone in just over 10 years.

##### ➤ State Agency / Regional Cooperation

Referenced earlier, Governor Docking’s 1971 EO encouraged state agencies to consider ways to work with regional organizations to deliver state programs and services. The NCRPC has had a degree of success in this area because it has worked with several different state agencies. Examples include on-going contracts with Kansas Housing Resources Commission (KHRC) to weatherize homes in 41 counties and the Kansas

Highway Patrol (KHP) to act as the fiscal agent responsible for the procurement of services and equipment for emergency response agencies and organizations in 102 counties.

Such contracts have compelled the organization to step outside the administrative geography defined by its membership. The result is the NCRPC has not only had control over those programs within its region, but it has also discovered the best ways it can extend its services to other parts of the state.

➤ Grant Writing / Grant Administration

The NCRPC's history of grant writing and grant administration has to-date helped its members access funding for 433 projects in its 50-year history. Such activity is not flashy, but it has addressed local water and sewer needs, road and bridge replacements and upgrades, community facility construction and improvement (e.g., community centers, parks, swimming pools), and housing rehabilitation on a regional scale. It has also been a major source of operational funding for the NCRPC.

The first two decades found the NCRPC primarily working with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's regional office in Kansas City for project funding. During this time frame (1972 to 1989) the office generated 56 successful applications, most using HUD funding. Then, in the very late 1980s, Kansas assumed responsibility for the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. NCRPC productivity dramatically increased after that for it produced 120 successful applications between 1990 and 1999; 125 between 2000 and 2009; and 132 between 2010 and today.

That success pattern began in 1986 when the state converted the Kansas Department of Economic Development to the Kansas Department of Commerce & Housing. The change brought in state staffing with fresh views on how certain programs could be better applied. One of the moves made by the reconstituted Community Development Division in the early 1990s was to invite a variety of regional players like the NCRPC staff to participate alongside Commerce staff in a workshop entitled, "Basically CDBG", facilitated by a nonprofit from Virginia. This was the first-time regional organizations received any real educational support or encouragement from the state as an equal "partner" and it had a positive impact on operations as evidenced above.

➤ Housing Rehabilitation and Support Services

Housing has been an area of focus for the NCRPC from its inception as acknowledged earlier under the Planning section. The weatherization program was then installed in 1979 with the intent of making older homes more energy efficient to lower utility costs for the homeowner or renter. The NCRPC moved into low-moderate income housing rehabilitation in 1980 when it accessed HUD CDBG funding for a member. There have been similar housing rehabilitation projects every year since that point.

Housing rehabilitation initiatives are not just limited to those of low-moderate income, for the NCRPC has developed a moderate-income housing rehabilitation program financed by the Dane Hansen Foundation (8 NCRPC counties) and the Patterson Family Foundation (4 NCRPC counties). This program:

- Offers reimbursement grants to qualified homeowners to address major structural issues like roofing, siding, windows, and H/VAC systems. There is a homeowner match requirement. The program is designed to ensure quality housing is available in rural NCK/NWK housing markets.
- Offers reimbursement grants of up to \$5,000 per property for the removal and cleanup of dilapidated residential structures.

In exchange for its support, the Dane Hansen Foundation (DHF) asked the NCRPC to extend this program to all twenty-six (26) DHF counties. A multi-year program has been subsequently created for that purpose.

The NCRPC has also established a down payment assistance program to aid eligible homeowners. Two (2) separate nonprofit companies, NCK Housing Opportunities, Inc. and Four Rivers Housing Opportunities, Inc., were created to house the funds.

The NCRPC further performs certified lead-based paint and asbestos inspections in addition to Housing Quality Standard (HQS) housing inspections. It employs a group of five (5) housing inspectors who work with both the housing and weatherization sections of the NCRPC.

Finally, in the 2000s the NCRPC became involved in the management of Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) housing. Those units require the support of a local agency who can process and approve prospective occupants, then oversee management of the property itself. The NCRPC has that capability given its staff's training. This management service has since been expanded to include not only LIHTC projects, but also other federally funded housing projects.

#### ➤ Capital Formation

Regional capital formation began during the mid-1980s inspired by the idea that having control over a pool of funds could lead to business development. This movement built additional capability within the NCRPC and introduced other regional players.

- **Certified Development Company (CDC):** The NCRPC created Four Rivers Development, Inc. (FORDI) in 1984 as a means of giving the NCRPC access to the Small Business Administration (SBA) 503/504 program. That program allowed certified regional organizations to offer loans using SBA funds and to gain servicing fees from those loans. FORDI lost its certified status due to programmatic rule which ultimately led to it being dissolved in 2009.
- **EDA Revolving Loan Fund:** In 1991 the NCRPC created its own revolving loan fund, receiving \$500,000 from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to which it matched \$167,000 generated by donations from area economic development organizations and local banks. As of September 2005, this program had issued \$2,056,325 in loans to 40 different businesses while using another \$142,600 to guarantee an additional 4 projects. The combined effect of this activity impacted 264 documented jobs.

In 2020 the NCRPC was awarded an additional \$1.0 Million to assist businesses with pandemic relief. As of August 2023, these new funds had been loaned to 19 different businesses, impacting 118 documented jobs.

- **Bank-Financed Revolving Loan Fund:** In 2006 the NCRPC created the NCK Business Development Fund using the nonprofit status of NCKCN to house the program. Funding of the program was realized by helping area banks, as members of the Federal Home Loan Bank in Topeka, to access money in increments of \$25,000 or less to aid area businesses. These banks, in turn, allowed recaptured funds to be returned to NCKCN and assigned to the NCK Business Development Fund for further use in regional business development. The total capital base of the program in 2023 is \$1.4 Million.

➤ Unique Projects having Regional Impact

In 1995 the NCRPC created North Central Kansas Community Network (NCKCN), Inc., a 501(c)3 corporation whose primary purpose was to provide local, affordable Internet access across the region. In doing so the NCRPC ceased to be just a transactional agency, receiving a fee for its services, and became an organization capable of crafting transformational solutions to common problems. Area businesses suddenly found they had a competitive advantage over even their urban counterparts since NCKCN enabled them to be first-to-market in many ways where before those markets were inaccessible other than by costly travel. Too, NCKCN’s reach exceeded the administrative boundaries of the NCRPC given its only restriction was the limitations imposed by the cost of technology, not by some arbitrary political boundary.

Current status

The organizational structure of the NCRPC has changed very little since inception. NCRPC members (counties and cities) continue to appoint representatives to oversee staff and Commission operations. As “owners”, members remain financially responsible for the NCRPC but only on an “as needed and when necessary” basis. Staff productivity has kept that amount low as evidenced by the fact member contribution is below 5.0% of the NCRPC’s operational budget which exceeds \$1.0 Million.

That latter fact is linked to the early federal and state policy changes noted earlier which required the organization to become more self-sufficient in order to survive. Operations soon became driven more by board sanctioned staff creativity than by board directive, a practice that has grown to what it is today. So, while the NCRPC still responds to member requests for assistance and performs project reviews, member representatives know the proposals in review are more often than not “action items” or “service opportunities” submitted by staff based on their observations and creativity.

Such change does not alter the fact the NCRPC still draws its legal existence from state planning law which provides the platform, perhaps better described as the pivot point, to perform services for all levels of government – federal, state, and local. But with member backing, NCRPC activity has opened additional avenues of development funding to address the needs of nongovernmental consumer groups, businesses, and residents. The diagram below seeks to illustrate this and other relationships.



Being designated an Economic Development District (EDD) by the Economic Development Administration (EDA), U.S. Department of Commerce, has only added to the agency's persona. While it does not change the fact the NCRPC is an RPC, the EDD strengthens the NCRPC given EDA's focus on economic development planning. That requires the organization to engage the region's various economic sectors whenever and wherever possible, seeking their input in the agency's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). Detail provided in that document is then used to construct the NCRPC's annual work program. The combination (RPC and EDD) alongside the nonprofit affiliates the NCRPC has created makes the NCRPC one of the stronger organizations engaged in regional development statewide.

Operationally, the North Central Regional Planning Commission (NCRPC) philosophically approaches regional development in two distinct ways. The first utilizes the geographic boundaries of its member counties, encompassing even nonmember counties that host member cities, to delineate the political extent of its primary service area. This approach aligns with traditional practices that emphasize defined administrative regions, and any attempt to introduce alternative service arrangements is often met with resistance both from within and without. However, this established approach is presently being challenged due to shifts in resident routines and advancements in information technology.

The second approach adopts a nontraditional, functional perspective, allowing the specific issue in question to determine the area served. This approach has typically involved contractual agreements with state administrative agencies in the delivery of specified programs (e.g., weatherization and homeland security). However, a notable development is the growing involvement of private foundations which now make themselves available for collaboration. These foundations have designated target areas that may not entirely align with NCRPC administrative boundaries, along with specific agendas they wish to implement using the support of entities like the NCRPC. While this approach has been in existence for some time, the NCRPC remains cautious in its application even though it knows this functional approach represents the future of regional development, particularly in rural areas.

## Review of Survey Responses

A survey was sent out to all members of the Executive Committee and staff, asking their response to a series of questions that fundamentally asked, “What was the Commission created for?” and “What has it become?” The response rate for the board was 53% while it was 72% for the staff. The following highlights the common response themes and summarizes the conclusions drawn from the answers provided.

### Organization

Both board and staff view the NCRPC to be an organization devoted to community planning and development although there was some disagreement in both ranks as to just what its relationship is with local government. Some described it as simply being a department jointly shared by the individual members while the majority saw the Commission to be a stand-alone agency operating independently of its members, yet answerable to those members.

Responses further showed members (counties and cities) have the responsibility to appoint representatives to the board, to pay reasonable dues to support operations, and to direct projects to the staff. Member representatives then have the responsibility to attend the meetings; to participate in meeting discussions; to review projects proposed by other board representatives and staff members; and to ensure NCRPC operations comply with member expectations.

When asked if the organization remains aligned with its initially stated general purpose the answer was a qualified “yes” with the board being more positive on this account than the staff. While both saw the NCRPC still engaged in the elimination of duplicate effort and promoting cooperation to bolster the region’s economy, the board noted it had the additional purpose of creating an inviting living environment.

The biggest difference between board and staff came in their response to, “How should NCRPC costs be covered?” Both agreed the first choice was the office should charge a sum equivalent to cost when staff are involved in a project. But after that, staff felt members should contribute a greater amount in dues to cover budgetary shortfalls while board representatives saw that to be the last thing that should be considered.

As for expanding the board, all were interested in discussing the move. The existing board is supportive so long as any new member comes from within the region. Staff, meanwhile, accepted the idea so long as those added had a track record of being well-managed and successful.

### Operation

When asked what the NCRPC could do better, the board responded by saying the office needed a better outreach program that not only made members aware of staff activities but also project opportunities and program training. They also suggested it would be helpful if staff performed single issue research on topics (e.g., housing, daycare) of concern to the region. The results might reveal solutions members could use to individually address matters on a local basis.

Staff agreed more planning and research are needed with some interest shown in creating a regional database of businesses. Training programs (e.g., workforce training) were also seen as being something the staff could provide given such training’s importance to future growth.

The biggest difference between board and staff interpretation of a question came in response to “What are the top three priorities?” The board responded by highlighting member concerns for:

- Housing;
- Aging infrastructure; and,
- The unique needs of each member county.

Staff, meanwhile, responded by pointing out needs of the organization:

- Succession planning;
- New income streams; and,
- Better understanding of where the organization is headed.

When asked about NCRPC importance, board comments said it connects communities to resources and provides needed service support structure. The staff responded by saying it is an important resource for community and economic development across the membership.

Finally, when asked if the NCRPC should provide services outside the regional boundaries the board response was mixed. Most saw value in getting outside the region so long as NCK needs were not ignored. Others felt staff should focus solely on internal issues. The staff was not asked this question.

**Conclusions drawn from these responses are:**

1. The primary thing the board wants is for the needs of the members to be addressed. They do not demand complete success, but they do expect the organization and staff to be committed to providing all members with equal attention and balanced effort over time in the resolution of local problems.
  - a. The office must establish a better means of communication between the office and the membership. Part of this can be achieved by annually devoting one board meeting to board member orientation, explaining how the NCRPC operates, what the roles and responsibilities of both board and staff are, and what the NCRPC seeks to accomplish as an organization. Another part is simply giving member representatives information that better enlightens them about what is being done across the region.
2. The primary thing the staff wants is obvious board support for what they are doing. Beyond that, they want a better understanding of the organization’s direction; better organization of the technology used internally; and better internal and external communication regarding programs and policies.
  - a. There is a need for better communication within the office about operational goals and objectives alongside the roles and responsibilities of staff members. This requires a greater internal exchange of information regarding the various programs being administered and managed by staff.
3. All parties continue to see the organization as having a role in fostering regional cooperation and coordination. Beyond that, neither group conveyed a unified principal objective nor offered a simple explanation of what the NCRPC does and why.

## SWOT Analysis

There is an old axiom attributed to the hockey player, Wayne Gretzky, that a player should never skate to where the puck is, but rather to where it is going to be. That thinking applies to strategic planning given a regional planning and development organization needs to anticipate future needs and then take the steps necessary to meet the challenges ahead. What follows is a review of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats the NCRPC must deal with, beginning first with the negative aspects of this analysis and ending with the resources and opportunities it possesses to address the issues at hand.

- Threats – Emerging competition; changing regulations; and internal uncertainty.

### *NCRPC as an Organization:*

1. It is a product of state planning law (K.S.A. 12-744 et seq.) which means it has no unique corporate standing to give it complete autonomy over its own existence.
2. It can simply cease to legally exist through loss of member participation.
3. Its competition is organizations whose newer “brand” reflects today’s terminology.

### *NCRPC as an Operation:*

1. Its productivity can be disrupted by external programmatic decisions made for policy reasons.
2. Its lack of succession planning involving both board and staff exposes the organization to potential loss of clientele.
3. Its loss of unique status within the public sphere has adversely impacted employee mindset.

- Weaknesses – Resource limitations; things others do better; and unique features it must navigate.

### *NCRPC as an Organization:*

1. It is a remnant of past political policy which was never fully implemented across the state.
2. Its original command and control structure has become challenged by evolving market demand.
3. Its members (stakeholders) remain verbally supportive but reluctant to commit financially.

### *NCRPC as an Operation:*

1. It has been hurt by the internal and external loss of institutional knowledge on all levels.
2. Its original purpose has lost clarity due to the passage of time which is a drag on operations.
3. It is hesitant of change and thus risk-adverse to new ideas / project areas.

- Strengths – Things the NCRPC does well and qualities that separate it from its competitors and other like organizations.

### *NCRPC as an Organization:*

1. It has the long-term patronage of local government which validates its existence.
2. It has forged informal relationships and processes that mimic a regional governance structure.
3. It is positioned to readily implement regional programs given its DNA is founded on the subject.

*NCRPC as an Operation:*

1. It has been operationally successful in pursuing an ill-defined, yet individually perceived purpose.
2. It remains a forum for regional discussion concerning issues held in common by all members.
3. Its well-trained staff can develop and deliver services or products of the NCRPC's own design.

- Opportunities – Emerging needs; underserved markets; and lack of competition in given locations.

*NCRPC as an Organization:*

1. It can take advantage of the loss of institutional knowledge to “re-brand” the organization and set its purpose for today's world.
2. It can use its regional identity to initiate genuine regional cooperation in goal setting.
3. It can “brand” itself as the regional entity to address the various causes of out-migration which contribute to population loss and the reduction of job opportunities.
4. It can be used as a launch platform for program design, grant access, and staff management.
5. It can provide consistent board / staff education to bestow a sense of ownership in the organization and offset persistent change caused by elections and/or normal turnover.

*NCRPC as an Operation:*

1. It can use its past success to attract or develop programs not otherwise found in the region.
2. It can create a regional vision of the future that attracts investment, not just from those living outside the region but also from those found inside the region's many communities.
3. It can establish partnerships with both nonprofit and for-profit entities to address issues of common interest to all within the partnership.
4. It can better document its affiliation with NCKCN to explain the hybrid relationship they share and the role each organization plays within that relationship.
5. It can emphasize planning as an operational function and a driver of new ideas.

This analysis shows the NCRPC is a product of the past. It has internal and external issues linked to that legacy which must be addressed. But even so, it continues to be productive by remaining loyal to its members and by responding to their long-recognized needs in exchange for their support. In other words, the NCRPC is a traditional, transactional service organization.

But it is also true the NCRPC has shown signs it has the capability of stepping outside tradition to become more transformational as well. Creation of the North Central Kansas Community Network (NCKCN), Inc. is a prime example of the NCRPC's potential to be a platform for substantive change. NCKCN altered the region's business and educational environment by introducing affordable Internet, enabling the former to expand the geographic scope of their operations and the latter to access and share teaching modules. Such creativity can be achieved again. It simply requires the NCRPC to view itself not just as a service provider engaged in solving today's problems, but as a development leader whose eye is on the future.

## Path Forward

### Mission Statement

The effectiveness of the NCRPC as a *regional planning and development organization* depends on the powers its members grant the Commission and how they see it as an entity. That should be reflected in the operational roles and responsibilities set forth in the organization’s by-laws. So, as we see here, the original intent of the founders for the Commission was that it:

*“Coordinate the economic, social, and physical planning and development of the Region and to seek and accept designation as an A-95 review agency. (Office of Management and Budget Circular A-95).”<sup>iv</sup>*

The A-95 part of its purpose became moot early in the 1980s while use of the word “coordinate” implies the Commission was expected to play a more passive role in the region’s development, seeking only to be a “coordinator” and not an active player. Wording in the intergovernmental agreement went a bit further by granting the Commission a more active role in producing “studies and plans” but only to “guide”, “eliminate”, and “promote” activities impacting regional development as displayed here.

*“...to make those studies and plans for the development of the region that will guide the unified development of the region, eliminate planning duplication and promote economy and efficiency in the coordinated development of the region and the general welfare and prosperity of its people.”<sup>v</sup>*

Operational history, however, finds the members have over time afforded the NCRPC a degree of political autonomy that has allowed the organization to operate as an entity separate from, yet responsible to that membership. This was reflected in board representative responses to the survey reviewed above and has enabled the organization to undertake projects that typically would not be associated with a regional planning operation given the scope and depth of the projects themselves. This too is one of the motivations for this strategic plan since the organization needs to know just what is expected of it and where it is going in the larger scheme of things.

A more contemporary mission statement developed by the board and staff that falls outside the by-laws and interlocal agreement seeks to better define the NCRPC’s mission today. The common element underpinning the statement is the NCRPC’s desire to make any area it serves a desirable and welcoming place to live and work, choosing to do so by:

*“...advancing rural Kansas through comprehensive planning and development services.”*

## **Review of board make-up / current staffing / programs relative to mission**

The Commission has the rare opportunity to refresh the organization by reconfirming which components of its original purpose remain viable and which must change to conform to the environment it now serves. By doing so the NCRPC can solidify its role as the central player in the region's development efforts, but that begins by acknowledging where changes in the mechanics of the organization have occurred.

### Current Board Make-up

Article V, Section 1, of the Commission's updated 2016 by-laws states the Executive Board governs the Commission. This continues a custom set down in the early 1980s when growth of the General Board made having a quorum at every meeting almost impossible. The decision was made then to transfer operational authority to the Executive Committee, today's Executive Board.

The Executive Board has fifteen (15) members, one (1) from each of the twelve (12) member counties and one (1) from each of the three (3) city classes (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>) found in the region. This is not in strict compliance with the by-laws given the latter would permit 17 members if population size alone was factored in, but the current membership is comfortable with the arrangement as stated.

Nine (9) members of the current board are elected county or city officials while the remaining six (6) are non-elected representatives appointed by their respective county or city. Those in this last group are typically associated with city or county economic development groups or local government staffing. The stated numbers constitute a 60/40 split, complying with Article V, Section 2 of the by-laws which mandates the majority (51%) of the NCRPC governing body be elected local officials even though state law regarding planning commissions does not require such a majority be in control.

Another layer of board make-up is associated with the NCRPC being an economic development district (EDD) recognized by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA). EDA requires at least a third of an EDD board to have some degree of expertise associated with the region's principal economic interests. The NCRPC has complied with this requirement by highlighting the work experience or business background of Executive Board members.

### Current staffing

Although members of today's staff work from scattered locations throughout the region, the organization has historically filled most staff openings by hiring area residents who live within commuting distance of the Beloit office. This is especially true for members of its professional staff since recruitment notices sent to college and university career centers have rarely produced any result.

What the NCRPC has learned through this hiring practice is a wealth of underemployed talent exists within the region. Those hired may not have the academic or immediate practical background matching the positions they fill, but experience shows they do have the aptitude to learn what the position requires, the drive to perform their job well, and the general desire to make a difference in people's lives.

Another characteristic of NCRPC staff is tenure. Just over a decade ago staff tenure averaged twenty-five (25) years while today that average is below seven (7) years. Retirements involving the most long-termed employees began around 2008. Where once new hires had the advantage of working alongside someone with experience, they must now serve the client even as they learn the program(s) involved. This is not

unusual, but the loss of institutional knowledge has created a degree of uncertainty in the office given the inexperience working with soft (inconsistent revenue streams) money.

One final aspect of the current staffing is certain office programs are understaffed. That places additional stress on those responsible for the programs. It also raises a variety of concerns for the NCRPC should one of the principals become unavailable or incapable of performing their work or simply decide to leave.

#### What current programs to continue, expand, or phase out

The world has changed in 50 years and so has the NCRPC. Today, four (4) different markets – members, consumer groups, businesses, and individual residents – can be delineated amongst those seeking assistance and their service requirements differ. Consequently, each subgroup needs to be broken down and reviewed, first by what services it requires and then by what opportunities each group affords the NCRPC.

- Current services benefiting members (e.g., counties and cities).
  - Planning support (e.g., capital improvements, comprehensive, strategic)
  - Grant writing / grant administration focused on infrastructure development (e.g., highways, roads, bridges, solid waste, water & sewer systems)
  - Phase I environmental impact studies on proposed infrastructure projects.
  - Special program management (e.g., ARPA)
  
- Current services benefiting consumer groups (e.g., social organizations, nonprofits, state agencies, or subject defined groups).
  - Grant writing / grant administration involving a variety of federal, state, and nonprofit programs.
  - Income surveys required by federal and state programs.
  - Fiscal agent for Homeland Security Program (state contract with Kansas Highway Patrol) for six of seven HS regions in the state.
  
- Current services benefiting businesses.
  - Loan packaging / servicing for individual businesses
  - Inspections provided owners of federally financed housing (HUD Section 8, LIHTC, USDA RD)
  - Management of LIHTC and HUD Section 8 housing complexes
  
- Current services benefiting individual residents.
  - Home weatherization (state contract with Kansas Housing Resources Commission) to improve the energy efficiency of residential housing.
  - Home inspections (HQS, certified lead-based paint, certified asbestos) to identify hazardous materials.
  - Home rehabilitation program management (moderate income and low to moderate income) focused on bringing residential properties up to standard code.
  - Demolition of properties approved by the owners that address health and safety issues in residential areas.
  - Funding for both first-time and previous homebuyers.

*Programs to continue:*

- Grant writing / administration: Most such services are predicated on experiential knowledge connected to some federal or state program. Given most NCRPC members do not engage the programs with enough frequency to gain such knowledge, they welcome assistance in securing and managing the funding the programs offer. It is therefore easy to say all such services will continue.
- State agency contracts: These should be maintained and encouraged since they provide a valuable service to the local constituency if handled appropriately. They further bring the NCRPC into contact with state officials, opening the potential for other such opportunities. They also provide a sizeable source of fixed funding for the office and the positions the programs support.
- Housing rehabilitation and demolition: Residents need tangible assistance that ensures affordable housing meets standard code. Given the age of the region's housing stock, this is a program that not only needs to continue but also to be expanded using diverse funding sources.
- Business finance: Helping small businesses find needed gap financing will always be an issue when it comes to business development in North Central Kansas. And while there are growing issues with other organizations having their operational costs subsidized or offering low-interest loans, this is a service that remains important to the NCRPC.

*Programs to expand:*

- Home rehabilitation. The cost of home rehabilitation has increased, making it difficult for low-moderate income homeowners to pay the difference between actual project cost and the limits of program assistance. To overcome this, ways to package multiple housing rehabilitation programs are needed to reduce the gap between program limits and homeowner capability.
- Home inspections. Real estate agents and lending institutions require houses on the market to be inspected to ensure they comply with current housing codes. The NCRPC should consider training members of its inspection team so they can be certified to perform such service home reviews.

*Programs to phase out:*

- LIHTC / Section 8 Housing management: Of all the services detailed earlier, the one that consumes time with minimal return potential is that associated with management of LIHTC and Section 8 housing. While such support is needed around the region, the NCRPC is only active in two (2) counties. It may be wise to look at this in one of two ways: get aggressive and seek out other housing complexes that need such support or cut the current program loose to reduce the time demands on office personnel.

New programmatic areas to support mission

The NCRPC must ensure the programs it offers promote new development opportunities while not overlooking the support requirements of existing constituencies. This latter part is key since the region's future is tied to the residents and businesses that are already here. While businesses founded on new age methodology and technology will develop, those now present are the foundation from which all future growth will occur.

It is within that context staff members should be ever watchful concerning the needs of the four markets identified given their needs can become growth opportunities for the NCRPC as an organization. And while there is only so much time each staff member can commit to production, that does not preclude cross-training to ensure individual staff can perform multiple roles to maximize use of existing manhours or the hiring of additional staff if the opportunity warrants such investment. What follows are some ideas of the types of opportunities that already exist.

Those of use to members...

- Planning as a service: Reinstating planning as a defined activity within the organization and a service accessible to others. Seek ways to foresee and organize the region's response to coming changes and to determine who will be impacted. It will also help identify shortfalls in the region's assets when comparisons are made with the needs of residents and business community.
  - Invite business leaders to board meetings to discuss needs the region might be able to address in a collective way.
  - As part of the planning program, seek ways to create a Geographic Information System (GIS) since such a system's ability to organize and map data is invaluable to planning efforts.
- Public administration services: Smalltown administrative officials (e.g., city clerks) are retiring and it is becoming increasingly difficult to find replacements. Consider providing services in budget preparation, including capital improvements planning, utility billing, etc. so city officials have the information and support needed to conduct city business.

Those of use to residents...

- Housing development: Consider forming a Comprehensive Housing Development Organization (CHDO). An attempt was made in 2008 to establish such an agency, but it was not implemented. The documentation remains in a file on the main office server and those involved remain accessible to provide insight into the initiative. Weigh the pros and cons of such an independent agency for housing development by discussing the benefits such an organization would bring to the region.
  - Include in these discussions a review of state law regarding Benefit Corporations, or B-Corps, which enable nonprofit organizations like NCKCN to team up with for-profit interests to pursue programs or projects of benefit to a specific geography.

The use of new technologies in housing development is another area to explore. Climate change is going to increasingly impact the lives of NCK residents, but the NCRPC can help residents mitigate that impact by developing educational programs and/or hosting regional conferences that introduce residents and communities to:

- Use of solar energy technology to lower home energy costs.
- Use of domestic water recycling technologies to preserve and lower water costs.
- Use of new construction materials (e.g., flowable concrete) to construct durable housing.

Another consideration is the construction of new single-family homes to replace demolished units in small communities. Such construction could be arranged by coordinating community interest with the production of multiple units by a manufactured home provider (e.g., Wardcraft) where the city

assumes the responsibility of improving the lot while the NCRPC raises the funds (e.g., via an equity fund) necessary to pay for each individual unit. Once the house is in place, the unit would be put for sale and treated like any other real estate transaction. Not only would this address a community’s housing need, it would also refresh the local tax base.

- Regional succession planning: Residents need to prepare for the challenges imposed by the region’s declining population, the age of its infrastructure, the growth of global economic systems, and what all that means for regional sustainability. To do so, the NCRPC should participate in creating the soft infrastructure required for residents to adapt to the changing socioeconomic environment.
  - Continuing Education: Use of technology to connect distant locations is now a common practice. However, just because it can be done does not mean it is being appropriately applied to produce productive results. There is a need for a regional training program and the NCRPC could provide that platform.
  - Workforce Training: “Job consumers” are equally as important as “job creators” so on-going training programs that mitigate the anticipated changes introduced by all types of technology are needed. Determine ways NCRPC personnel can address this issue by working with area Technical Colleges or private enterprises. The table below provides an overview of the top ten (10) business sectors expected to be impacted by technology in the next decade.

<b>Largest growth vs. largest declining job categories</b>			
<b><u>Top 10 largest growth job sectors</u></b>		<b><u>Top 10 largest declining job sectors</u></b>	
1	Agricultural Equipment Operators	1	Data Entry Clerks
2	Heavy Truck and Bus Drivers	2	Administrative and Executive Secretaries
3	Vocational Education Teachers	3	Accounting, Bookkeeping and Payroll Clerks
4	Mechanics and Machinery Repairers	4	Security Guards
5	Business Development Professionals	5	Building Caretakers and Housekeepers
6	Building Frame and Related Trades Workers	6	Cashiers and Ticket Clerks
7	University and Higher Education Teachers	7	Material-Recording and Stock-Keeping Clerks
8	Electrotechnology Engineers	8	Assembly and Factory Workers
9	Sheet and Structural Metal Workers, Molders, and Welders	9	Postal Service Clerks
10	Special Education Teachers	10	Bank Tellers and Related Clerks

**Source:** World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/jobs-ai-cant-replace/>

- Health care and health care services: Of the thirteen (13) hospitals operating in the region, only four (4) have had a positive operating margin in the past three years. Four (4) of the remaining nine (9) have had double-digit percentage losses for the same duration and two (2) of those are at risk of immediate closure. Given the median age of the region has risen from 41.9 years to 44.9 years in the past decade, the importance of local health care services is only going to increase. The NCRPC needs to explore ways it might be able to assist in helping address this growing issue.

Those of use to businesses...

Business services can be broken down into three parts: business development, business finance, and business support. It is important all three sectors be addressed in some way by the NCRPC going forward.

- Capital formation: Contact the Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) to see if the NCRPC is eligible for CDFI Classification and if any of the CDFI programs can be made to work in North Central Kansas. CDFI’s focus in the past has been more in line with social justice issues involving populations not commonly found in large numbers across the region, but circumstances may have changed.

Also consider the formation of a regional equity fund capitalized by area investors for business development. Such funds were used to attract both businesses and residents in the early stages of area settlement in the late 1800s and there may be a use for them now to retain businesses and residents. There are models of such funds available on the internet (e.g., [www.blackrock.com](http://www.blackrock.com)) that can be explored.

- Business services: Learn from past initiatives. Small business owners need support in one or more of the following areas: Product/service management, financial management, and marketing. And given it is becoming increasingly difficult for businesses in rural areas to find support assistance, there is an opening for the NCRPC to step up and help entrepreneurs and businesses conceive, develop, and implement business plans.

One aspect of this section could be a package deal whereby an entrepreneur can engage the NCRPC in a year-long support contract. The contract could include:

- “Classroom” instruction on classic business models and management techniques. This could be set up in tandem with a local Chamber of Commerce involving multiple small businesses or be offered to a targeted audience via the Internet.
  - Engagement of the client at his / her place of business with the NCRPC agent actively participating in the business operation – not to the point of making decisions, but enough that the advice being given can be focused and specific.
  - A provision that allows the client to call the assigned NCRPC agent anytime something arises that the client feels another’s input is needed.
- Business programs not locally available: There are several programs that have been pulled from the region and are now only made available from a distance under specific circumstances. The NCRPC should consider either replicating such services or becoming an agent of the offering agency or program itself. The goal is to make them locally available. Some such services are listed here.
  - The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) has chosen to close its regional office. Contact the SBDC and ask if there is any possibility for the NCRPC or some other entity (e.g., Cloud County Community College or NCK Tech) to become the SBDC agent in North Central Kansas. If not, consider duplicating the services SBDC offered to ensure such business and entrepreneurial support remains locally available.
  - Create a rural version of the “RedTire” program promoted by The University of Kansas. While that at KU is largely focused on developing succession plans for manufacturing enterprise, the program proposed here would center on helping those in the technical trades (carpenters, electricians, plumbers, H/Vac professionals, etc.). In so doing, the program would counter jobs

lost through Main Street business closures plus take steps to ensure such home-maintenance services remain locally available to area homeowners.

- Continuing with that theme, create, operate, and market a virtual shopping center composed of regional businesses. This approach would counter the loss of critical mass in the markets they serve by opening avenues to a larger population of potential buyers. There are a variety of platforms for just this purpose that can be reviewed with formats ranging from the elaborate to the basic. Such service could be coordinated through county-level community/economic development offices and local chambers of commerce. Use the presence of NCKCN to create web content, not just provide Internet access.

#### Board growth, sustainability, and diversification

NCRPC by-laws are restrictive in terms of board growth and composition. The number of voting representatives from each member county is limited to population in increments of 10,000 residents or fraction thereof. Article VII, Section 1 speaks of the possibility of other special governmental units (e.g., schools, hospitals, water-related districts) joining the Commission but only as ex-officio members. Likewise, other political subdivisions of the state are welcome provided they either have an independently elected governing body or have the power to incur financial obligation for public improvements. But voting membership is solely limited to the county governments forming the Commission even though K.S.A. 12-744 et seq. does not mandate the board be controlled by a locally elected official majority.

Such restriction requires creativity in organizational operation. The greatest concern now, however, is board sustainability since it is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve a quorum at board meetings. Part of the reason can be assigned to COVID and use of “Zoom” technology which made virtual meetings possible. But while such an approach was useful at the time, it now complicates matters. Several members continue to attend meetings virtually rather than devote the time necessary to make the trip to the meeting location even though distance is not always a factor. Those individuals have difficulty understanding what is being discussed or presented given technical limitations in sound quality and visual scale. The result is a seeming loss of interest in and awareness of what the NCRPC is doing.

Then too, board meetings have become pro forma presentations of the minutes, financial report, and staff reports. While that is part of the expected process, more time should be devoted to discussing board views on member needs, on-going projects in their home counties, or organization development. Again, the result of not doing so is a growing loss of interest in NCRPC activities. This needs to be changed.

Part of the solution involves an annual board orientation and education program. Another part is to meet individually with each new representative to discuss their interests and concerns. Introduce new members to the existing board and engage all parties in a discussion about the board’s purpose and the responsibilities everyone shares. Here is a listing of some things to consider in doing so.

- Produce a handbook for board members that describes the NCRPC and contains pertinent information about the organization and its operation. Include:
  - A set of updated by-laws that better reflect the organization as it exists today and the environment it serves.
  - A synopsis of state planning law and a copy of the members’ Interlocal Agreement.

- A board member job description. Further include an evaluation process whereby member representatives can annually review their individual performance alongside that of the board as a whole.
  - A copy of the board-approved current budget.
  - A copy of the board-approved work program.
- Review meeting schedules and structure to determine what board members wish to see discussed and/or presented during the meetings.
- Weigh the pros and cons of bi-monthly versus quarterly meetings in addition to expanding the length of meetings if fewer meetings are held.
  - Weigh the pros and cons of holding meetings at different locations with the board representative(s) from that county acting as host.
  - Develop meeting protocols designed to reduce the number of hybrid meetings.
    - Require in-person attendance for a set number of meetings with it being understood no provisions will be made for representatives to attend via virtual means.
    - Establish the number of times and/or conditions under which virtual meetings will be planned and arranged. Provide board training that introduces the best uses of video conferencing technology to maximize product use of the latter.
- Review meeting content to determine what board members seek to learn and/or accomplish during the event.
- Evaluate the use of “dashboards” to display information in graphic form to visually show the results of staff activity in all member counties.
  - Consider having at least one board representative lead a discussion on a topic of their choice at each meeting.
  - Invite outside interests to speak concerning the findings of their research or the use of their programs if the subjects are of interest to the region.

Another part is better communication between the board and staff. One suggestion noted above is a dashboard that presents a substantial amount of information in pictorial form (e.g., maps illustrating activity at the county level). A mockup of what that might look like can be found in Appendix “D”. What is seen is not intended to be THE dashboard, but rather an example of what can be done. It provides details about staff activities across the region along with certain financial aspects of the organization.

As for board representative diversification, there are limited ways to do so now. Discuss revising the by-laws to remove the mandate that 51% or more of the board be local elected officials. State law does not require that. Consider the value of staff identifying people in each county who have an interest in NCRPC activities and presenting those names to the respective county commissions for approval.

Survey results further show the current board is not opposed to the idea of committees, although some reservations were expressed about how committees can sometimes be seen as a detriment to progress since they can become entrenched and end up going nowhere. But this is a viable avenue to engage outside groups which can only strengthen the NCRPC as an organization.

## Revenue growth, sustainability, and diversification

The NCRPC is a hybrid organization given it is a function of local government which has adopted the operating style of a nonprofit. There are four (4) sources of revenue available for base operations although its costs are predominantly covered by service fees associated with project grants acquired for members.

- **Member contributions in the form of dues:** Member counties and cities provide about 5.0% of the NCRPC's operational funding and the board shows no interest in setting membership dues any higher than the amounts currently being paid.
- **Service pricing / fees for specific services:** Member representatives have discussed and approved staff be permitted to establish a service fee structure that applies to all parties, including members. This approach needs to be collectively discussed and accepted by the entire staff so everyone understands what they must charge all clientele to cover time and effort in addition to overhead costs.
- **Direct grants:** Grants that solely fund operations are rare. Federal and state agencies, along with private foundations, prefer to finance projects that address a specific issue or group of issues, knowing as they do the operational costs of the proposing agency are included. Such funding is becoming increasingly important, which requires staff to better recognize and describe projects that not only address a need but also meet the interests of a prospective funding source.
- **Donations / Private Sector Investments:** Donations and investments from interested parties are a potential future source of funding. Development of this source is critical if the NCRPC wishes to become a more transformational organization than one predicated on transactional activity.

A part of producing and sustaining success is tied to how the NCRPC presents itself to its clientele.

- **Marketing:** The NCRPC should develop a systematic means of making personal contact with members and informing them about programs of potential benefit. Then too, the NCRPC needs to devise a means of informing those in the other three categories (communities, businesses, and residents) of services that might improve their living and operating conditions.

Another part is connected to how the NCRPC selects its projects.

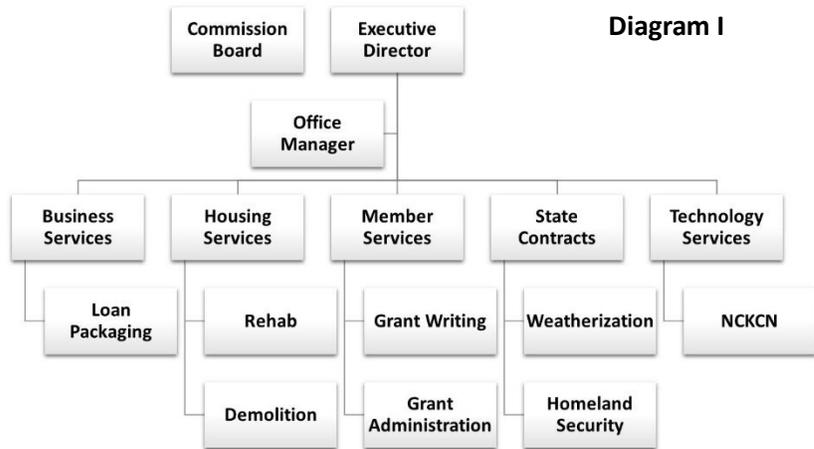
- **Broaden the Market:** The NCRPC should make its community development services known and available to a broader market. Currently, most, if not all, of the service provided is centered on corporate places (cities, towns, villages, etc.) while other types of consumer groups in the region may have a need that goes unattended. Examples of such social communities are social organizations, special interest groups, and other governmental agencies.

One additional means is for the NCRPC to no longer just be willing to seek out established programs (e.g., federal, state, or private foundation) to address and fund regional needs, but rather to seek out ways to create its own programs. But doing so will require all parties to keep the following in mind. What the organization may choose to create may not be immediately accepted by the intended clientele. Likewise, pricing tied to such service may also be rejected for a variety of reasons. The result is staff must learn when and where to walk away from projects and the board must be willing to support them in those decisions provided the latter can be justified.

**Organizational culture**

NCRPC culture has traditionally been depicted by the structure seen in Diagram I. It is a setup often used to describe the chain of command in governmental organizations and large, well-established corporations. Furthermore, it marries well with the organizational model illustrated on page 8 of this document which describes an entity composed of three parts: members, their representatives, and staff.

In that paradigm members hold the position of providing “advice and consent” on proposed projects. This is given through a commission board composed of member-appointed representatives with the staff then carrying out what the board has reviewed and approved. And while that arrangement of organizational authority remains in effect, it can be argued that the simplicity of Diagram I is no longer sufficient to describe NCRPC operations.



A closer examination of the NCRPC today reveals a much more complex approach to service delivery, one better explained by the characteristics of a *network*. In such a model the various programs are set apart from the main. At the center (Diagram II) is the Administrative Staff who work with the Member Board to set policy and monitor the organization’s overall operation and its material needs. While connected to the various programs, administrative staff are typically not directly involved in any project other than by providing support when requested by service group personnel. Otherwise, they ensure the appropriate people are hired, trained, encouraged, and given the tools necessary to perform the tasks defined by the project.

Individual program staff then make real-time decisions and function in the best manner possible to implement their programs to address the needs of the region. If that means going outside the borders

**Diagram II**



defined by member jurisdictions to gain an advantage over an issue or problem, so be it so long as individual members are benefited, and their interests not ignored.

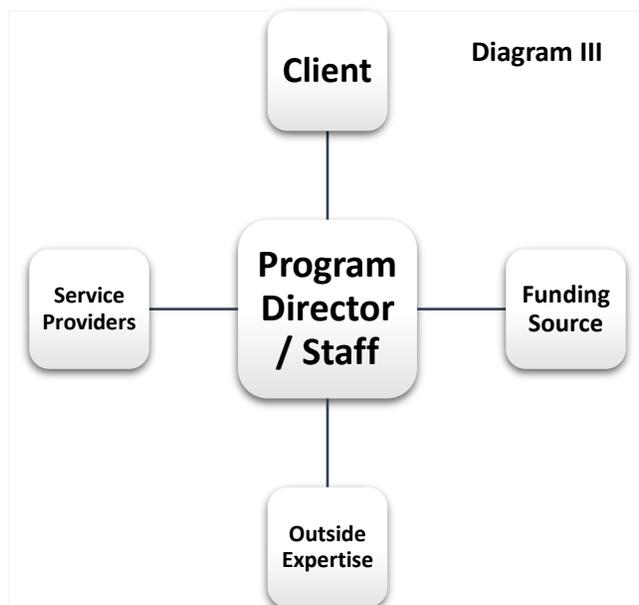
Such a system often seeks to pool clerical support so program manpower needs can be addressed on the fly. This is being discussed within the NCRPC office as to its present practicality, but it is something of interest going forward. For

now, the agency seeks to cross-train personnel to build internal capability of shifting people to where they are needed when demand warrants. Either approach can satisfy the organization’s need for internal capacity and capability.

Each service category can then be further broken down (Diagram III) with select staff having the responsibility of working with the client during project design. That individual and others work to access the appropriate funding source and to procure and oversee the service providers performing the needed tasks if funding becomes available.

It is the multiplicity of program areas, the external partnerships, and the outsourcing of work in each category that establishes a constantly changing service delivery structure. To some degree, it is a “design-build” system predicated on project need.

That is evidenced by the fact staff members are given the liberty to seek out new funding sources and to develop new projects. Workflow does not necessarily come from the Board or the Administrative Staff, but rather from the contacts program staff have with regional clientele. Then too, staff sometimes inform member counties and cities of issues they see when driving through those locations. In that way, they fulfill the NCRPC’s role as a legal extension of the member governmental units.



Such a network structure opens doors to other opportunities, including the possibility of seeking the services of or providing services to other regional development organizations. This involves the sharing of human assets and the formation of temporary teams whose talent combinations are better suited to address specific issues than any one organization’s staff might otherwise be able to accomplish. That mindset extends to utilizing and serving the various county-level development groups that have formed since they too have specific talents that can be tapped or experience talent shortfalls that need to be filled.

But sustaining such a structure requires better staff awareness and leadership. It necessitates the creation of well-defined lines of communication and clarity of purpose in pursuit of the common goal. Individual staff members currently do not see the entirety of the organization nor fully understand how programs within the organization work in combination to address the region’s needs. The NCRPC must therefore develop and maintain a staff orientation program that addresses the following issue areas.

- What is the internal communications structure between staff and management?
  - List the various ways management and staff communicate with one another.
  - Explain the function and purpose of all scheduled staff gatherings.
  
- What is the internal operational structure?
  - How are tasks assigned within the office?

- How is work sequenced through the office?
- What controls or limitations exist regarding program director decision making?
  
- What latitude do staff members have to choose their work location?
  - Must all staff members have an in-office presence in Beloit?
  - Under what conditions are staff members allowed to work from home?
  - How is productivity measured if work location becomes a factor?
  
- What career paths exist within the NCRPC for staff members?
  - How can an employee move from one program to another within the office?
  - What options exist for staff to become cross-trained in a manner that enables them to assist with the tasks of another program if time allows?
  - How is employee recruitment, on-boarding, and retention addressed?
  - How is staff education and training addressed?
  
- What rewards exist that support staff ingenuity and productivity?
  - How are salaries and benefits set?
  - Are there opportunities for bonuses or commissions based on individual effort and initiative; productive ideas; or office achievements in keeping with nonprofit rules and regulations?

### **Opportunities for partnerships and multi-regional initiatives**

The NCRPC is thus aware regional development organizations today must be flexible in their approach and capable of transcending political borders to accommodate the shapeless social, economic, and environmental interdependencies that exist amongst multiple communities. Most, but not all, of those involved realize that unlike the past, projects set boundaries and determine the stakeholders, not the traditional reach of the agency or agencies involved. That necessitates a degree of diplomacy to be involved in discussions that heretofore was not required. What is needed is a neutral party that presents a level playing field for multiple players to engage one another and remain focused on solving given issues rather than protecting turf.

NCRPC by-laws, as written, do not limit the organization’s service area to simply the footprint set by county members. Rather, such service limitation is inferred by those involved given traditional views of boundaries and their limitations. The opportunity exists for the NCRPC to play the role of being a forum for discussion supported by its base of regional knowledge and supplemented by further research and training. It can be a hub that shapes its service response to an issue as demand or opportunity warrants, using the very nature of the challenge to negotiate the appropriate means by which all available resources are applied across the geography involved.

Posturing itself in this way follows the NCRPC’s original mandate of building a cooperative and collaborative environment to resolve common issues. North Central Kansas is quite rural and local development players are focused on protecting local interests. There is plenty of opportunity for the actions of one to jeopardize the projects of others, which opens the door for a third party to ensure everyone sees themselves benefitted by the success of their neighbors. But that will not always be possible, so there is an additional need to establish basic understandings of how all parties will behave when conflicts arise. The NCRPC is well suited to serve in both roles given its history.

The NCRPC can also become a conduit for services offered by others or the replacement of those service providers vacating rural North Central Kansas. As the diagram suggests, it will require NCRPC staff to



improve their communication links with the various sectors and to take advantage of any opening they hear or sense. And it is not just about drawing services *from* those groups but positioning the NCRPC to become a service provider *to* and *for* those groups.

One way of identifying potential openings is to review the existing development plans of member counties and cities, the CEDS of adjacent regional organizations, and the state’s Framework for Growth. In so doing the NCRPC can seek to match its capabilities against the goals others expressed in their documents. Once that is done, the NCRPC can develop proposals that

detail joint opportunities and explain how NCRPC capabilities can be applied to the benefit of all parties approached in this manner.

And while such an approach may not be universally accepted, when applied it begins to reshape everyone’s thinking about the capabilities and capacities of established development organizations, especially those of the NCRPC itself.

**Metrics, reporting, etc.**

Progress is measured by comparing inputs and outputs to outcomes which typically involves the quantification of all elements to mark the changes taking place. But progress can also be measured by recognizing effort as cause and the response as effect. The following provides a list of things to check off as the organization begins to reset its operation and to evaluate the impact of its activities.

- Immediate goals
  - Board involved:
    - Review and update by-laws
    - Consider and decide on meeting schedules: bi-monthly or quarterly meetings.
    - Begin inviting business, community, and educational leaders to board meetings to discuss their views of North Central Kansas and the needs of their various economic sectors.

- Staff involved:
  - Build the framework of a database that contains base-line demographic, economic, and housing information about the region. Build a similar database that contains details on staff activities involving infrastructure, community development, business development, including job creation, and housing. Measure NCRPC impact by comparing the two in percentage terms.
    - Ready access to such data will enable staff members to compare the activities of their programs to regional needs. The intent of such a tool is not just to prepare reports for funding agencies, but to generate reports for the NCRPC itself to quantify its efforts.
    - Design a dashboard template that can display past, present, and proposed details about staff productivity across the region alongside other information pertinent to NCRPC operation.
  - Ensure all program directors understand the need to diversify sources of funding for their programs since that ensures multiple sources of revenue for the organization.
  - Initiate staff orientation and training starting with discussions on internal communications between management and staff.
  
- Monitoring inputs, outputs, and outcomes in 2024.
  - Board involved:
    - Does board attendance increase because of the initial steps taken above?
    - Does board member participation in meeting discussions increase because of:
      - Changes in meeting frequency?
      - The presentation of data via a dashboard?
      - Board member leading discussion on topics of personal interest?
    - Do board members turn out for the board orientation and training meeting?
      - Does it become apparent board members are using the handbook?
    - Does the presence of outside leadership (e.g., business, community, and education) change the level of discussion during board meetings?
  
  - Staff involved:
    - Continue staff orientation and leadership discussions.
      - Do project numbers increase?
      - Do staff members meet the quotas set by the projects they administer?
      - Do staff members remain aggressive in accessing multiple sources of program funding?
      - Do staff members present their ideas for new programs during staff meetings?
      - Do staff members update their portion of the database the produces the dashboard?

## APPENDIX “A” – 2023 Strategic Plan Summary

The purpose of this dashboard is to provide a general overview of the strategic plan laid out in the full document. It highlights the motivational forces of the organization, its board and staff composition, and the various ways the NCRPC seeks to address the many needs of the region. And in so doing, it lays the foundation from which the NCRPC can measure change going forward.

## APPENDIX “B” – Client Markets and Services

The purpose of this dashboard is to further breakdown the various services the NCRPC offers its members and their constituencies alongside the assistance it is willing to provide outside groups (e.g., state agencies and nonprofit organizations) seeking to address an issue of concern in North Central Kansas. The breakdown identifies both current and potential future services as well as how the NCRPC generates revenue from its operations.

## APPENDIX “C” – Board / Staff Orientation

The purpose of this dashboard is to illustrate the structure of the organization, its operational culture, and the current reach of its activities. That information sets the backdrop for the questions posed to both board and staff to better orient all parties’ understanding of just what the NCRPC is and what it does.

## APPENDIX “D” – NCRPC Production Dashboard Example

This dashboard is a mockup of a reporting system that illustrates staff activity in visual form. Its layout is not intended to be fixed in stone, but rather to demonstrate how office production can be broken down on a county-by-county basis. Doing so gives individual members a better understanding of how a county or city of specific interest to them is being benefited by their investment in the NCRPC operation.

## Notes, and Source Material

---

<sup>i</sup> Tatarko, Beth, The Austin-Peters Group, 1999 report citing information taken from The Character of Organizations written in 1992 by William Bridges.

<sup>ii</sup> Interlocal Agreement, Section 5: Functions, Duties, and Powers, adopted August 21, 1972.

<sup>iii</sup> By-laws, Article VI: Sharing of Costs, adopted May 16, 1973.

<sup>iv</sup> By-laws, Article V, Section 1.G, paragraphs 7 & 8, adopted March 29, 1979.

<sup>v</sup> Interlocal Agreement, Section 5: Functions, Duties, and Powers, adopted August 21, 1972