

Grand Island, NE 5-Year Action Plan Update AARP Livable Community Age Friendly Network



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Executive Summary

Grand Island is a city in Nebraska and the county seat of Hall County. It serves as the principal city of the Grand Island metropolitan area, which consists of Hall, Hamilton, Merrick, and Howard counties. The population was 53,131 at the 2020 census, making it the 4th most populous city in Nebraska. The Grand Island metropolitan area has an official population of 83,472 residents.

Grand Island has been given the All-America City Award four times (1955, 1967, 1981, and 1982) by the National Civic League.

“Nestled in the heart of America’s Great Plains, Grand Island stands as a testament to perseverance, growth, and the ever-evolving spirit of the American Midwest. This city’s storied past paints a vivid picture of pioneers, challenges, and the tenacity of the human spirit.”
(<https://explorenebraska.us/blog/history-of-grand-island-nebraska/>)

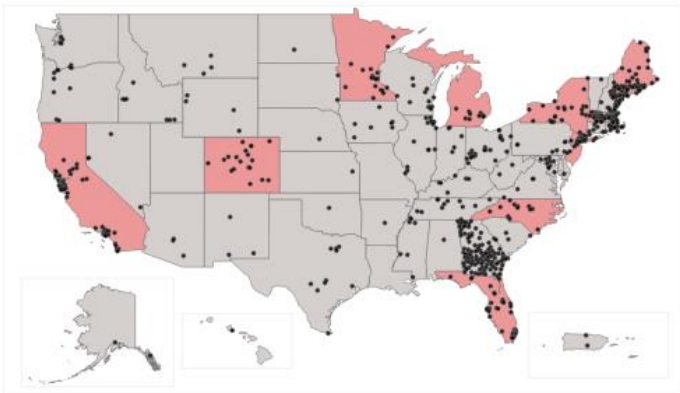
To learn more about Grand Island, go to visitgrandisland.com.

When Grand Island learned about AARP’s Livable Community and Age-Friendly Network, we immediately wanted to know more. It seemed natural to do all we could to be a livable place for people of all ages, abilities, and economic levels. “Such places provide a host of advantages that enhance the quality of life of residents, the economic prospects of businesses, and the bottom line of local governments.” (aarp.org/LivabilityRoadmap).

Grow Grand Island, with core partners consisting of our area Chamber, Economic Development Corporation, and Tourism Office, have taken the lead role to represent Grand Island as a member of the Age-Friendly Network. Our connection with the City and County allows continuous engagement and collaboration across many sectors of our residents and businesses. For more information about Grow Grand Island, go to growgrandisland.com.

Our first five-year action plan summary is included below (the full action plan is available upon request). The pages that follow provide our progress for each of those goals shown.

At the conclusion of this report, you will find goals to be added to our action plan.



Grand Island remains the only community in the state of Nebraska enrolled in the Age-Friendly network, however, there are other interested communities who are exploring and they have reached out for our expertise.

Our current Livability Index Score is 56.

2020-2024 GRAND ISLAND LIVABLE COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN SUMMARY

“Livable communities are good for people and good for business. They are places where Americans increasingly want to live, work and play. Whether a person is young or old, starting a family or a business, livable communities provide a host of appealing advantages that enhance the quality of life of residents, the economic prospects of businesses, and the bottom lines of local governments.”

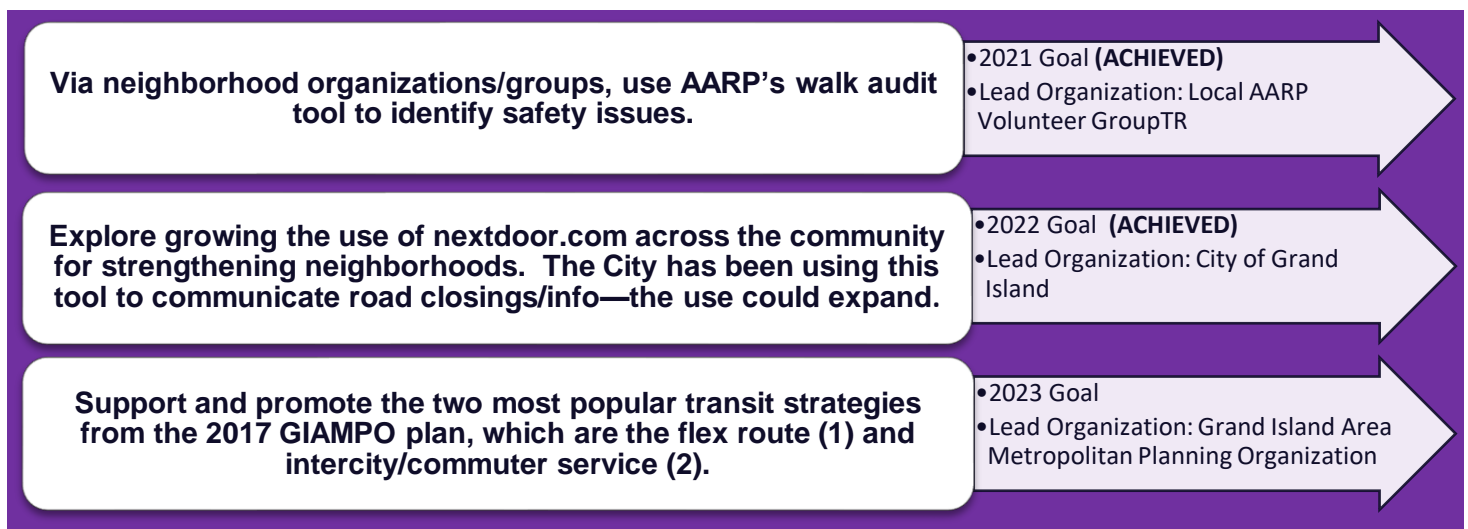
-The Livability Economy; People, Places and Prosperity (AARP)

Grand Island joined the Livable Community Network in December 2018 as the 311th member. The following five domains were chosen because of their close tie-in to the existing Grow Grand Island program of work. Being part of the Livable Community Network has enhanced the program of work by ensuring our initiatives and future visioning is done through the lens of age and ability—to be an inclusive place for all people. The goals resulted from community input and engagement.

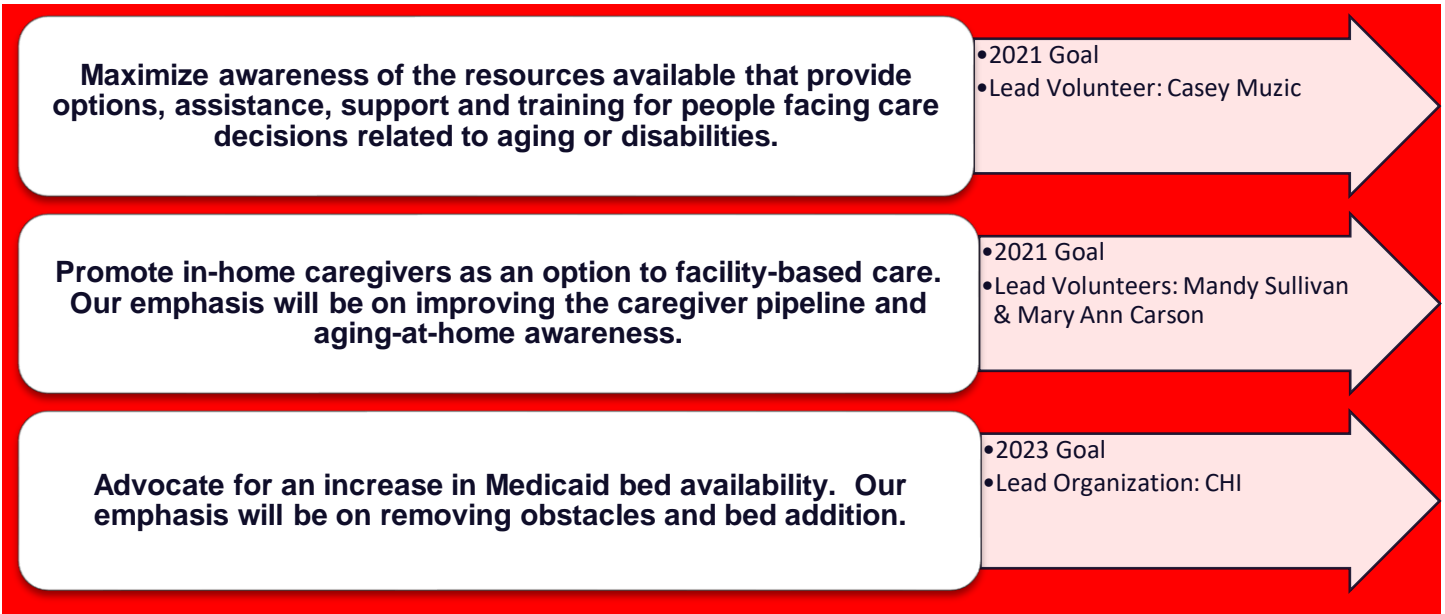
HOUSING



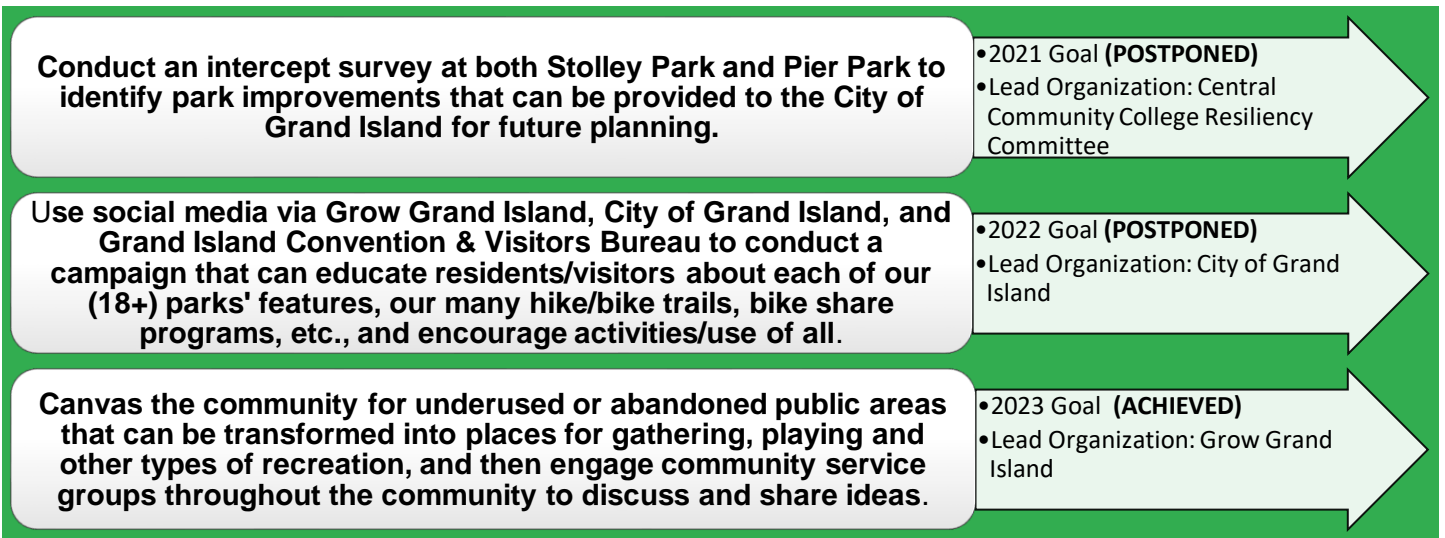
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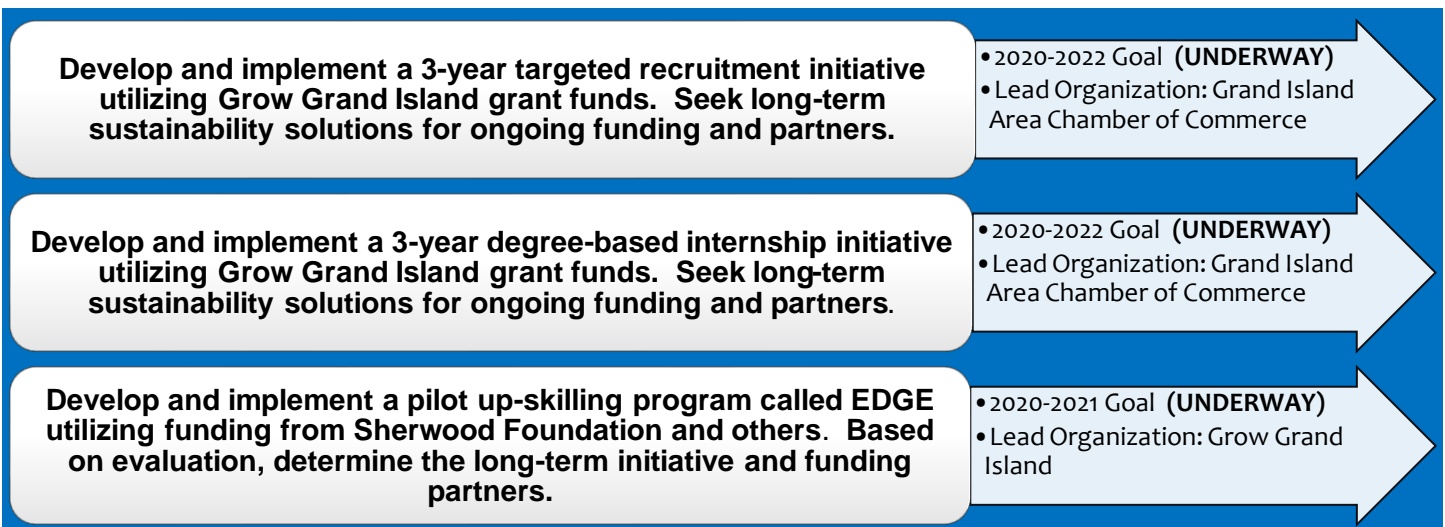
HEALTH SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS



OUTDOOR SPACES & PLACES



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & EMPLOYMENT



Domain: Housing

✓ Goal: Create a Housing Improvement Partnership. (Lead organization: City of Grand Island)

This goal was established to provide cohesive collaboration among the many organizations that play a role in developing/providing housing opportunities. A Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP) was recommended as part of Grow Grand Island's original program of work, as well as the housing study completed in 2019.

“If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself.”

-Henry Ford

The Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP) was originally formed in late 2019 to include representatives from these organizations:

- City of Grand Island – Community Development Building Grant (CDBG) Office
- Grand Island Area Economic Development Corporation (GIAEDC)
- Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- Habitat for Humanity
- Grow Grand Island

The first accomplishment of the HIP was identifying all housing resources in the area. These resources were compiled into a brochure and made available through the partner organizations.

In addition, using available CDBG funding, many neighborhood crosswalks were modified to be wheelchair/bicycle accessible throughout Grand Island. This has been and will continue to be ongoing work with the goal of making sure all neighborhoods have the proper curb ramps for crosswalks.

In 2021, through a new state funding program, the GIAEDC was awarded \$1M (with \$1M matching funds) which was used to create a revolving loan fund, called “Build Grand Island,” whereby builders could apply for an 18-month zero interest loan. The HIP assisted with the application content and served as the review committee. Three developers were awarded; 17 units were developed.



A second state grant application was submitted in 2023 and awarded for another \$1M (with \$500k matching funds). These funds have not yet been received but will be soon; to be followed by a third application.

The COVID pandemic took its toll on the HIP as a body of people working together. Meetings ceased and each organization focused on their own work. Then, as is often the case, it can be difficult to get back into the swing of things.

Having said that, however, several entity representatives sat down in October of 2023 to revive our HIP efforts and to expand our partnerships. We look forward to a relaunch in early 2024, as well as a new housing study.

Domain: Housing

✓ Goal: Create a Critical Home Repair program. (Lead organization: Area Housing Development Corporation)

This goal was established because 16% of our housing stock was built before 1940. Whether owner-occupied or rented, this stock is often our elderly or impoverished.

Critical repairs such as roof, windows, foundation erosion, and heating/air can be quite expensive, especially when income is limited.

“Getting the word out about these programs to the right people is a real challenge.”

-Tonja Brown, Grow Grand Island

The Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP) was approached by the area Housing Development Corporation (HDC) in early 2020 to help with two grant-funded housing rehabilitation programs that were currently available specifically for Grand Island that were unfulfilled and up against the grant period deadline.

These opportunities were designed to provide financial assistance upwards of \$25k toward specific types of home improvement, such as structural, mechanical, electrical, weatherization and plumbing. One program is for owner occupied housing; the other is for unoccupied properties that will result in owner occupancy. Both programs have requirements and restrictions, but for the right situation can make a big difference for both homeowners and neighborhoods.

By utilizing the internal networks of all HIP organizations, as well as an article in the local newspaper, all grant funds were disbursed by the deadline. Also, the area Housing Development Corporation became an engaged partner in the HIP.

Domain: Housing

Goal: Implement an annual housing summit to review the 2020 Housing Study Report. (Lead organization: Grand Island Area Economic Development Corporation.)

This goal was established because it is important to keep the recommendations of a large-scale study in mind as the months and years go by.

“Plan your work and work your plan.”

-Napoleon Hill

This goal was not achieved per se, as annual summits were not held. The COVID pandemic is partly to blame for that because gatherings were discouraged and sometimes prohibited. Still, progress has been made on recommendations outlined in the housing study.

The Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP) launch was one of the recommendations, and as outlined in the previous pages, has been successful in many ways.

In addition, the grants received by both the Grand Island Area Economic Development Corporation for housing development, and the area Housing Development Corporation for critical repairs, have had a positive impact on the housing stock.

The housing study occurs every five years and includes new data and refreshed recommendations to meet forecasted needs. We now look forward to the new housing study which will kick off in January 2024.

Going forward, it is our intention for the HIP to review the report annually rather than holding a summit to do so.

Domain: Housing

✓ Goal: Explore Land Banks. (Lead organization: Grand Island Area Economic Development Corporation)

This goal was established because of recently approved legislation which opened up the opportunity for housing development using land banks.

Contrary to what their name would suggest, land banks are not financial institutions. They are public or community-owned entities that are created to acquire, manage, maintain, or repurpose vacant, abandoned, or foreclosed properties.

“Land banks can create a more effective, efficient and equitable system to return problem properties to product use according to community goals.”

<http://communityprogress.org/resources/land-banks/>

The Housing Improvement Partnership (HIP) explored this promising concept but to date no organization has had the opportunity to utilize land banks yet.

It has been said “having the right tool for the job makes all the difference.” With this in mind, we look forward to utilizing land banks when/if applicable.

Domain: Transportation

- ✓ **Goal: Utilize walk audits to identify safety issues. (Lead organization: Grow Grand Island and local AARP volunteers)**

This goal was inspired by the tremendous walk audit tool kit made available by AARP that can be used by anyone to identify walkability issues in their own neighborhood.

Empowering individuals to become engaged in making their neighborhoods safer is the best possible way to do the right thing for the right reasons.

The AARP Walk Audit Tool Kit can be downloaded here:

<http://aarp.org/livable-communities/getting-around/aarp-walk-audit-tool-kit.html>

This is one goal that took on a life of its own! And, with the help of a Quick Action Challenge Grant has materialized into a multi-year effort to strengthen neighborhoods. Below is the newspaper article from July of 2022:

As announced by AARP on June 29, “For the sixth annual AARP Community Challenge, AARP received more than 3,200 applications from nonprofits and government entities, resulting in a highly competitive selection process. Some \$3.4 million is being distributed to fund 260 quick-action projects across the country, helping urban, rural and suburban communities make immediate improvements and jumpstart long-term progress to support residents of all ages.”

Grand Island is one of five Nebraska communities to be selected. Other communities include Haigler, Lincoln, Omaha (2), and South Sioux City. Grand Island’s application was submitted by Grow Grand Island in the amount of \$4,500.

*The funds will be used to launch a community-wide campaign to strengthen neighborhoods by engaging in meet and greets. A “neighboring kit” will be produced containing the book *The Art of Neighboring*, a yard sign, and other helpful information. The kits will be distributed to*

participants at the Global Leadership Summit, which is a live-stream event occurring on August 4-5 hosted by Third City Christian Church. You can register to attend this event by visiting <https://www.thirdcitychristian.org/gls>.

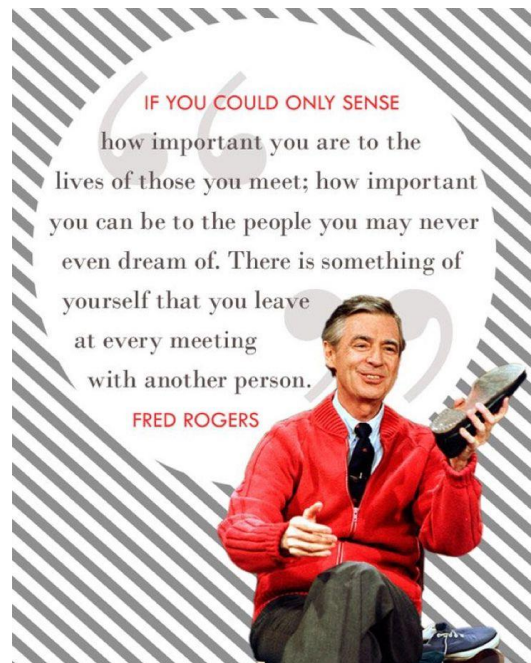
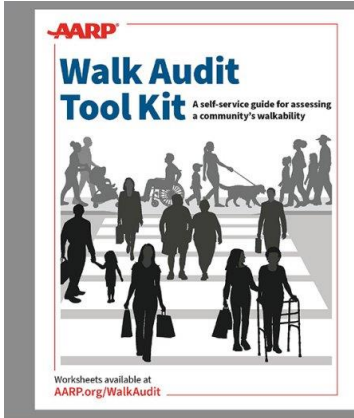
Grow Grand Island's project is patterned after National Night Out, which was introduced in August of 1984 through an already established network of law enforcement agencies, neighborhood watch groups, civic groups and regional crime prevention associations and volunteers across the nation. The first annual National Night Out involved 2.5 million neighbors across 400 communities in 23 states.

According to Police Captain Elliott, we had a few neighborhoods participating pre-pandemic in the National Night Out, including his own. Since the pandemic, however, there has not been much activity. He feels this project could ignite and grow neighborhood engagement, which he supports and encourages.

By providing a "neighboring kit," people are equipped with the tools and guidance they need to begin fostering relationships within their neighborhoods. Those who attend the Global Leadership Summit are the initial target audience. Extra kits will be distributed via other groups such as local AARP volunteers, our local Rotary Club, and other local community organizations.

*As stated in the book *The Art of Neighboring*, "the individuals we live next to have a big impact on the quality of our lives. In the grand scheme of things, relationships are much more important than bricks and mortar, and our neighborhoods are much more than collections of houses." Also, this quote from the book sums up the challenge many of us have as humans: "It's so easy to draw negative conclusions about the neighbors we've only glimpsed."*

The next page illustrates the project graphically. To date, nearly 100 kits have been distributed — 22 to the local AARP volunteer group and 10 to interested people outside of Grand Island. We await some walk audit success stories! 😊



Domain: Transportation

- ✓ **Goal: Explore nextdoor.com for neighborhood communication. (Lead organization: City of Grand Island)**

This goal was established because nextdoor.com appeared to be an emerging tool the City of Grand Island was utilizing that potentially could be expanded.

Nextdoor Holdings, Inc. is an American company which operates a hyperlocal social networking service for neighborhoods. The company was founded in 2008 and is based in San Francisco, California.

“...neighborhoods are among the most important communities in our lives...”

<http://about.nextdoor.com>

Some City departments experimented with the social media platform, but nothing materialized for reliable and consistent use. Based on this, we did not do anything intentional to push this social media platform to the general public.

Having said that, however, nextdoor.com organically has 20+ defined neighborhood groups in Grand Island available to follow. And, as an example, the “West Faidley” neighborhood group in-and-of-itself has 376 neighbors signed up.

Organic growth is expected to continue, and this platform is a good way for neighbors to connect with each other for recommendations, lost pets, and many other wants and needs.

Domain: Transportation

Goal: Support the City’s transit plan—specifically flex route and intercity/commuter service. (Lead organization: Grand Island Area Metropolitan Planning Organization)

This goal was established because a Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) was freshly rolled out by the Grand Island Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (GIAMPO) in 2017. The flex route and intercity/commuter service were identified as bold ideas that would transform our public transportation service.

“Use public transportation whenever you can. You’ll gain insider knowledge about the area, save money, and you may even meet a few friends along the way.”

-Jen Gold

This goal has not been achieved yet. Since the initial plan in 2017, GIAMPO has made many amendments. Public input was gathered in 2020 and reviewed in 2021. This revised plan categorizes projects by mode, as well as timeframe (short-term, mid-term, and long-term). A separate transit (mode) study was conducted in 2022.

LRTPs are required to be fiscally constrained, meaning GIAMPO should demonstrate that project costs can be reasonably funded by future transportation revenues. Fiscal constraint is a core element of the performance-based planning process and ensures that MPOs are planning a financially sustainable transportation system.

The specific projects that will have an impact on the operation of our public transportation system have yet to be determined and categorized.

Our role at this point is to be engaged with input and feedback.

Domain: Health Services and Community Supports

Goal: Promote in-home caregivers as an option to facility-based care. Our emphasis will be on improving the caregiver pipeline and aging-at-home awareness. (Lead Volunteers: Mandy Sullivan & Mary Ann Carson)

Mandy and Mary Ann are strong supporters of aging-at-home. They are a mother-daughter duo who seek to engage wherever they can to advocate for options that make it easier. Their passion is contagious. Although there were many discussions held, unfortunately the pandemic halted them. Their work has not yet resumed.

Goal: Advocate for an increase in Medicaid bed availability. Our emphasis will be on removing obstacles and bed addition. (Lead Organization: CHI Health St. Francis)

The pandemic has impacted both healthcare providers and Medicaid in many ways. The long-term impacts are still unfolding. Recent federal legislation has resumed regular reviews of eligibility. The state of Nebraska began reviewing in March 2023 and anticipates it taking a year to iron things out. We will be keeping an eye on things.

Goal: Maximize awareness of resources for people facing care decisions related to aging or disabilities. (Lead Organization: Midland Area Agency on Aging)

This goal was established because the office for the Midland Area Agency on Aging is in Hastings, Nebraska, which is 20 miles South of Grand Island. The agency serves an 8-county area, of which 4 of these counties make up the Grand Island Metropolitan Service Area. We support spreading awareness of their services and service area, but we have not identified any specific strategy yet.

Domain: Outdoor Spaces & Places

Goal: Conduct an intercept survey at both Stolley Park and Pier Park to identify park improvements that can be provided to the City for future planning. (Lead organization: Central Community College Resiliency Committee)

Stolley Park and Pier Park are two of our largest and oldest City parks. Both are also widely visited. This goal was inspired by AARP's "Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of All Ages" tool kit.

"Public parks are important places for building a sense of community and social belong."

<https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/tool-kits-resources/info-2018/livable-parks-guide.html>

A lot of progress and momentum were put into this endeavor throughout 2019. A 2020 spring/summer outing was planned and recruitment for volunteers was underway. The ensuing pandemic had us take pause and ultimately call it off.

This goal has strong potential for spring/summer 2024!

Goal: Use social media via Grow Grand Island, City of Grand Island, and Grand Island Tourism to conduct a campaign that can educate residents/visitors about each of our (18+) parks, our many hike/bike trails, bike share programs, etc., and encourage activities/use of all. (Lead organization: City of Grand Island)

This was a follow up goal to the one above and has strong potential for 2024-2025!

Domain: Outdoor Spaces & Places

✓ **Goal: Canvas the community for underused or abandoned public areas that can be transformed into places for gathering, playing and other types of recreations. (Lead organizations: Grow Grand Island and City of Grand Island)**

Over the last decade or so, our downtown's Third Street area has been revitalized with new small businesses and apartments. With this development came sidewalk trees, benches, and planter boxes. Green space, however, was missing.

“Green spaces are good for human health, and they are crucial for community health.”

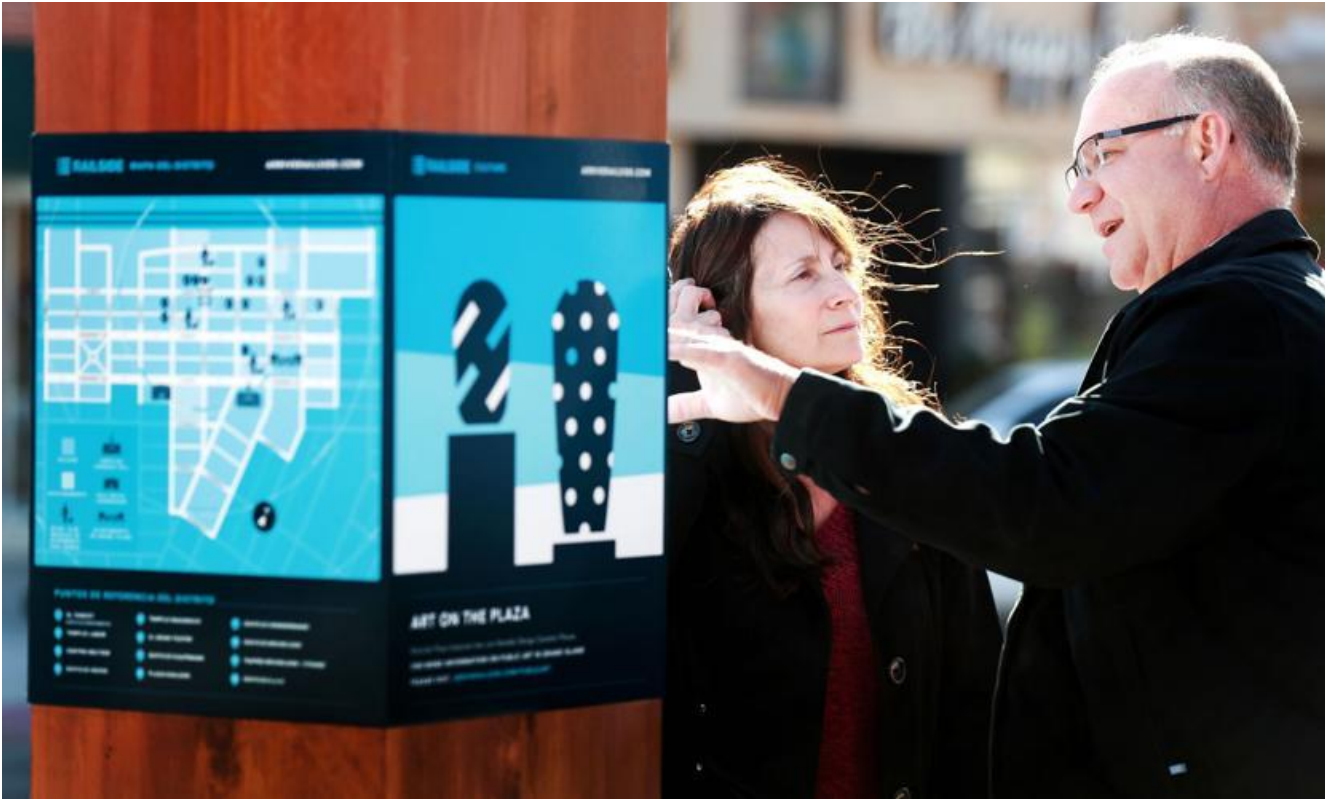
-The Arbor Day Foundation

A partnership between Amur Equipment Finance, Grow Grand Island and the City of Grand Island led to a section of parking lot in the middle of our downtown's "Raiside District" being transformed into a park. Other funders joined in, to include the Greater Grand Island Community Foundation, Wolbach Foundation, and Five Points Bank. This area is now known as Amur Plaza and was opened for public use the summer of 2023.

Amur Plaza includes a permanent stage, which has enhanced our HEAR Grand Island summer concert series. This weekly free event has successfully drawn large, diverse crowds of people to enjoy a variety of music for the last ten years. We also added family friendly and ADA compliant public restrooms. It is our hope the area will be a place for relaxing, as well as a place for gathering in new ways going forward.

On the horizon, the City of Grand Island will be adding a green space to the Fourth Street area located just north of Raiside, as well as additional lighting. This area has aged infrastructure and buildings, but a similar revitalization as Raiside is happening. This is good news for Grand Island's downtown area.

Our downtown area is historic, especially Third Street in our RAILSIDE District. We were able to acquire an AARP Challenge Grant in 2019 to place four way-finding totems in key places throughout the district. These totems include information in both English and Spanish. A short historical reference is also included with a website link to learn more.



Our newly formed Fourth Street Business Improvement District is predominantly made up of small minority businesses. RAILSIDE (Third Street) and Fourth Street are separated by several railroad tracks. There is a desire to explore a pedestrian bridge to bring these two districts together.

Not only would a bridge connect the two districts for ease of access and safety reasons, but it would also connect our diverse community cultures. The new Amur Plaza area is a great place to launch the bridge.

This is a long-term goal, but one we must not let get lost over time.

Domain: Civic Engagement & Employment

- ✓ **Goal: Develop and implement a 3-year targeted recruitment initiative utilizing grant funds. (Lead organizations: Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce)**

The next three goals are geared toward workforce sustainability, hitting three primary focuses—attracting talent, connecting business with education, and up-skilling current workers for advancement.

This recruitment goal was designed to develop a message delivered through storytelling that could be used on a variety of platforms and mediums and pushed out to a larger Midwest region. Out of the process, we hoped to discover a community brand.

“Good values are like a magnet—they attract good people.”

-John Wooden

In the midst of our three-year initiative the COVID pandemic hit, making recruitment challenging. We got off to a good start and have since picked things back up well.

The most exciting outcome is that we are now embarking upon a collaborative campaign that reaches both a tourism audience as well as a worker audience. And, we have arrived at a community brand that can be used by other businesses and entities.

We expect the brand to be carried by our Chamber, Economic Development Corporation, Convention & Visitors Bureau, City of Grand Island, Grow Grand Island, and Fonner Park as soon as it officially launches in 2024. We hope other organizations and businesses jump on board as well.

Domain: Civic Engagement & Employment

✓ **Goal: Develop and implement a 3-year degree-based internship initiative utilizing grant funds. (Lead organizations: Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce)**

As part of our three-pronged approach to workforce sustainability, this goal is focused on connecting business with education.

“Strong communities are built on diversified economic foundations and trained, eager talent pipelines.”

-Mary Berlie, President, Grand Island Area Economic Development Corporation

Wayne State College approached us in 2020 with a new Co-op Employer Partnership Program they previously launched as a Pilot with Norfolk, Nebraska, in 2019. The pilot was successful, but it needed support from the Nebraska Legislature for funding to expand.

Grand Island worked with Wayne State College to map out a financial plan to bring the program to our local businesses. We also supported their Legislative call to action. Our successful efforts have resulted in the first cohort of 15 interns coming to Grand Island in 2025. We anticipate increasing this number to 60 by 2030. 80% of interns who are extended job offers at the company where they interned accept them. This is why this program is important to Grand Island.

This innovative internship program is designed to educate Wayne State College students on campus for their first three years, followed by a full year internship to be spent in Grand Island.

Our next step is to provide internship housing. An initial project will begin in 2024 and will accommodate our immediate needs. Another project targeted for completion in 2026 will provide inter-generational housing for people of all ages and needs, to include interns and independent living for adults. This project also includes some recreational amenities.

Domain: Civic Engagement & Employment

- ✓ **Goal: Develop and implement a pilot up-skilling program called EDGE utilizing grant funds. (Lead organization: Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce)**

As part of our three-pronged approach to workforce sustainability, this goal is focused on upskilling current workers giving them the opportunity for advancement. As these workers advance, their jobs become available for others to gain experience and skills.

“Those who keep learning, will keep rising in life.”

-Charlie Munger

The EDGE program was designed and developed by a local committee of businesspeople and employment professionals seeking to provide soft skill training for workers that have shown potential but need a little edge to get them to the next level.

EDGE was based on the Department of Labor “Building Blocks Model” which is shaped like a pyramid. The base of the pyramid identifies foundational soft skills that are essential for all jobs regardless of industry or position. EDGE focuses on those foundational tiers.

The Sherwood Foundation got behind the concept with \$20,000, followed by Union Pacific Foundation with \$10,000 and First National Bank of Omaha (FNBO) with \$5,000. These funds have allowed us to offer the EDGE program at no charge. To date, we have had five cohorts totaling 73 graduates from varied businesses, industries, ages, and backgrounds.

An additional \$5,000 grant from Union Pacific Foundation will allow us to offer a special cohort in 2024 for English speaking migrants or minority citizens new to the area.

2025-2029 Additional Action Plan Goals

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings:

- Transform Mormon Island State Recreation Area into a state park by consolidating surrounding land tracts, including the newly acquired (by City of Grand Island) Camp Augustine Park, to include new educational and recreational amenities.
- Connect the current South Locust trail to Camp Augustine Park allowing hike/bike access from our community to the park area.

Respect and Social Inclusion:

- Explore ways to provide support to the newly formed Fourth Street Business Improvement District, which is made up of many ethnic entrepreneurs who have established businesses and created a cultural corridor for our community to enjoy.
- Explore the possibility of an ADA accessible bridge for safe crossing over the expansive railroad tracks connecting Third and Fourth Streets.

