DRAFT STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK AND ACTION PLAN

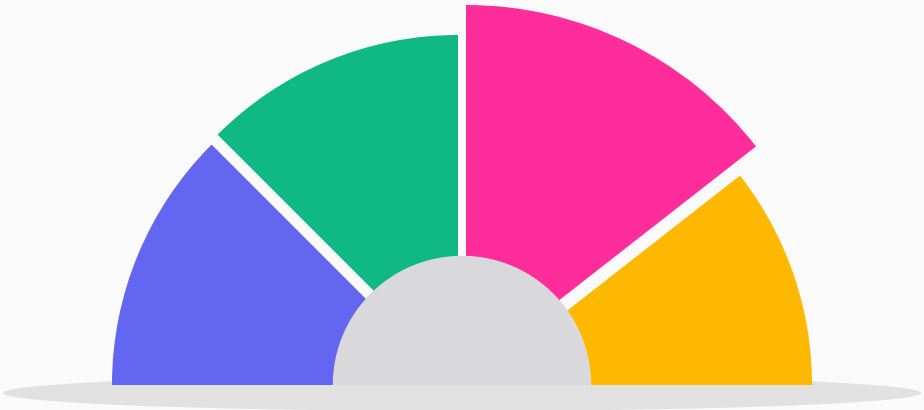
# Southeast Nebraska 2027–2031 CEDS

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

**Public Review Copy · November 2026**

Prepared by the
**Southeast Nebraska Development District (SENDD)**

**PUBLIC REVIEW DRAFT.** Proposed strategies are subject to public comment, partner consultation, funding availability, and approval.



# At a Glance

REGIONAL VISION

**A resilient and thriving Southeast Nebraska where strong rural economies, accessible opportunities, reliable infrastructure, quality housing, and vibrant communities support long-term regional prosperity.**

**Proposed overarching goal.** Strengthen quality of life, quality of place, and long-term economic vitality through coordinated investments in businesses, workforce, housing, childcare, infrastructure, broadband, and community amenities.

## Framework: vision, five priorities, six goals

Five priorities organize the needs; six goals organize the work.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Priority 1<br>**Rural Economy** | → | Goal 1<br>**Rural Economy and Business Development** |
| Priority 2<br>**Workforce** | → | Goal 2<br>**Workforce Development**<br>Goal 4<br>**Childcare** |
| Priority 3<br>**Housing** | → | Goal 3<br>**Housing** |
| Priority 4<br>**Infrastructure & Resilience** | → | Goal 5<br>**Infrastructure, Broadband, and Economic Resilience** |
| Priority 5<br>**Quality of Place** | → | Goal 6<br>**Parks, Recreation, Arts, and Community Amenities** |

Childcare (Goal 4) is shown under Workforce and community amenities (Goal 6) under Quality of Place, as the framework note describes.

## Six proposed goals

1 **Rural Economy and Business Development**
Strengthen and diversify the regional economy through small-business support, downtown revitalization, agriculture, tourism, and entrepreneurship.

2 **Workforce Development**
Expand workforce training, respond to employer needs, and strengthen regional workforce partnerships.

3 **Housing**
Increase access to affordable, attainable, and quality housing through rehabilitation, construction, redevelopment, and partnerships.

4 **Childcare**
Improve affordable, reliable childcare access to support working families and regional workforce participation.

5 **Infrastructure, Broadband, and Economic Resilience**
Strengthen essential infrastructure, reliable broadband, and the region's capacity to anticipate, withstand, and recover from disruptions.

6 **Parks, Recreation, Arts, and Community Amenities**
Enhance community livability through recreation, public amenities, arts, and cultural opportunities.

## Selected findings behind the framework

**72.2%**
Respondents who prioritize skilled-trades training
**Goal 2 · Workforce**

**70.8%**
Respondents who prioritize small-business development
**Goal 1 · Rural economy**

**66.7%**
Businesses that identify housing as a barrier to growth
**Goal 3 · Housing**

**56.9%**
Respondents ranking rehabilitation of older homes as the top housing solution
**Goal 3 · Housing**

**15.5%**
Employers who say they can reliably find qualified workers
**Goal 2 · Workforce**

**40 of 51**
Communities reporting fair or poor water systems
**Goal 5 · Infrastructure**

**2.44 / 5**
Childcare survey rating, the lowest rating received
**Goal 4 · Childcare**

**73.6%**
Respondents describing their communities as growing or stable
**Strengths · Community stability**

# Purpose and Scope

This document presents the proposed vision, SWOT analysis, regional priorities, goals, objectives, and action items for public review. It is not the complete CEDS. The full CEDS will also contain regional background analysis, an evaluation framework, and supporting information.

Actions are numbered by goal (for example, 3.4 is the fourth action under Goal 3) so that reviewers can refer to specific items when submitting comments. The questions that SENDD would like reviewers to consider appear near the end of this document.

# Regional SWOT Analysis

The following SWOT findings are retained from the working draft. Survey figures and other statistics should be checked against the underlying source data before final adoption.

## STRENGTHS

**Community stability & optimism**
73.6% describe their communities as growing or stable; 60.9% are optimistic about the next five years.

**Strategic geographic location**
I-80, U.S. 75, U.S. 81, and rail connect communities to regional markets.

**Strong agricultural foundation**
High-quality farmland, agricultural production, and related businesses.

**Diverse economic base**
Agriculture, manufacturing, retail, services, and small businesses.

**Educational resources**
Schools, Southeast Community College, universities, and workforce training.

**Tourism & recreational assets**
Historic sites, cultural destinations, outdoor recreation, and local attractions.

**Regional partnerships & resources**
Lending programs, technical assistance, and established collaboration.

**Competitive statewide labor market**
Nebraska unemployment of 3.0% vs. 4.3% nationally at the cited assessment date.

## WEAKNESSES

**Population decline & youth retention**
Declines in several rural communities, especially southern and eastern counties; difficulty retaining young adults.

**Workforce shortages & skills mismatch**
Difficulty attracting and retaining qualified and specialized workers.

**Housing affordability & availability**
Aging housing stock, limited attainable options, and rising costs.

**Childcare shortages**
Childcare received the lowest survey rating, 2.44/5.

**Aging infrastructure & transportation**
Roads, utilities, and mobility constraints increase costs and limit development.

**Limited access to fresh food**
55.6% say fresh food is unavailable or only slightly available locally.

**Economic conditions & investment capacity**
Current economic conditions rated 2.96/5.

**Education & workforce development**
Uneven opportunities, workforce preparation needs, and limited local career pathways.

## Regional SWOT Analysis (continued)

### OPPORTUNITIES

**Workforce & skilled-trades training**
72.2% prioritize skilled-trades training; expand partnerships with Southeast Community College and other institutions.

**Small-business development**
70.8% prioritize small-business development; support attraction, retention, expansion, and succession.

**Ag diversification & value-added production**
Food processing, specialty crops, and related enterprises.

**Regional collaboration & partnerships**
Stronger coordination among governments, EDOs, businesses, schools, and public-private partners.

**Broadband expansion**
Affordable, reliable connectivity for businesses, remote work, education, healthcare, and agriculture.

**Downtown revitalization & housing redevelopment**
Build on HomeLift, DTR, PRR, and adaptive reuse.

**Expanded community development funding**
Leverage 2025 CDBG policy changes and grant activity.

**Tourism & outdoor recreation development**
Heritage tourism, trails, parks, and visitor experiences.

**Better utilization of existing resources**
Leverage colleges, schools, facilities, public-private partnerships, and regional organizations.

### THREATS

**Aging & declining population**
Continued losses and aging threaten workforce availability, tax bases, and services.

**Outmigration & brain drain**
Loss of young adults and skilled professionals can weaken the workforce and entrepreneurship.

**Water quantity & quality**
Availability and quality pressures threaten agriculture, businesses, and communities.

**Rural healthcare vulnerability**
Financial and operational concerns, including Geneva, Hebron, and Falls City.

**Housing preservation risks**
Approximately 1,035 LIHTC-supported rental units potentially at risk within five years.

**Rising costs & disaster-related pressures**
36.1% cite insurance costs as a leading disaster-related concern.

**Substance abuse & community impacts**
Potential strains on health, safety, workforce participation, and well-being.

**Long-term community resilience**
Interacting demographic, infrastructure, cost, and service pressures.

# Proposed Regional Priorities

Five cross-cutting priorities organize the regional needs assessment.

1 **Rural Economy**

Small-business development (70.8%) · Agriculture and retail growth potential (47.2% / 45.8%) · Downtown revitalization (36.1%) · Tourism and storytelling

2 **Workforce**

Skilled-trades training gap (72.2%) · Youth retention is the #1 workforce challenge (50%) · Only 15.5% of employers say they can reliably find qualified workers

3 **Housing**

High housing costs and limited availability (56.9% / 55.6%) · Rehabilitation of older homes is the top-ranked solution (56.9%) · 66.7% of businesses identify housing as a barrier to growth

4 **Infrastructure and Resilience**

Aging infrastructure is the #1 named issue (41.7%) · 40 of 51 communities report fair or poor water systems · Downtown revitalization (36.1%) · Insurance and utility disruption risk (36.1%) · Broadband (18.1%) and healthcare access (16.7%)

5 **Quality of Place**

Recreation (58.3%) · Downtown revitalization (36.1%) · The bundle of amenities and services that keeps people from leaving

**Framework note:** The five cross-cutting priorities above organize the regional needs assessment. The six implementation goals that follow separately identify childcare as a workforce-enabling issue and community amenities as a quality-of-place issue.

# Proposed Goals, Objectives, and Action Plan

## 1 GOAL 1
## Rural Economy and Business Development

**Proposed objective:** Strengthen and diversify the regional economy through small-business support, downtown revitalization, agriculture, tourism, and entrepreneurship.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1.1 | Provide small-business financing and technical assistance. |
| 1.2 | Continue supporting eligible Downtown Revitalization (DTR) applications. |
| 1.3 | Host regional learning and coordination events on downtown revitalization, upper-story redevelopment, and downtown planning. |
| 1.4 | Explore eligible tourism-related funding opportunities, including applicable CDBG programs. |
| 1.5 | Encourage agricultural diversification, including hydroponics, alternative crops, and value-added agriculture. |
| 1.6 | Explore the feasibility of mobile meat-processing opportunities (including the proposed Meat Pod concept). |
| 1.7 | Identify opportunities to support migrant and seasonal agricultural workers and related community needs. |
| 1.8 | Explore Nebraska tourism grants for regional storytelling and destination promotion. |
| 1.9 | Meet annually with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. |

### Related findings

**70.8%**
Respondents who prioritize small-business development

**36.1%**
Downtown revitalization (Rural Economy priority)

**47.2% / 45.8%**
Agriculture and retail growth potential

**POTENTIAL COORDINATING PARTNERS (TO CONFIRM)**
SENDD, local EDOs, municipalities, business and agricultural partners

**POTENTIAL PROGRESS INDICATORS · 2027–2031**
Businesses assisted; DTR applications supported; partner meetings

2

GOAL 2

# Workforce Development

**Proposed objective:** Expand workforce training, respond to employer needs, and strengthen regional workforce partnerships.

- **2.1** Explore funding for skilled-trades training and workforce development.
- **2.2** Convene regular meetings with area economic development organizations (EDOs).
- **2.3** Partner with EDOs to survey businesses, identify skills gaps, and target workforce funding.
- **2.4** Support Nebraska Economic Developers Association (NEDA) and related workforce initiatives.
- **2.5** Meet annually with state senators to discuss workforce priorities and opportunities.

## Related findings

**72.2%**
Respondents who prioritize skilled-trades training

**50%**
Youth retention: the #1 workforce challenge

**15.5%**
Employers who say they can reliably find qualified workers

**POTENTIAL COORDINATING PARTNERS (TO CONFIRM)**
SENDD, EDOs, training providers, employers

**POTENTIAL PROGRESS INDICATORS · 2027–2031**
Employer consultations; training partnerships; funding applications

GOAL 3

# 3 Housing

**Proposed objective:** Increase access to affordable, attainable, and quality housing through rehabilitation, construction, redevelopment, and partnerships.

- **3.1** Explore purchase-and-resale and purchase-rehabilitation-resale housing approaches, as appropriate.
- **3.2** Conduct targeted housing assessments or “housing-lite” studies.
- **3.3** Encourage second-story and upper-story residential redevelopment in downtown buildings.
- **3.4** Explore eligible HOME funding for single-family housing development and rehabilitation.
- **3.5** Continue and explore expansion of the HomeLift program.
- **3.6** Assess the feasibility of a regional land bank.
- **3.7** Assess available property and housing-condition data to support potential land bank inventories, using appropriate privacy safeguards.
- **3.8** Develop an inventory of potential infill and redevelopment sites.
- **3.9** Continue supporting new-construction programs through SEND, Inc. and SENAHC.
- **3.10** Strengthen partnerships with SEND, Inc. and SENAHC.

## Related findings

**66.7%**
Businesses that identify housing as a barrier to growth

**56.9%**
Rank rehabilitation of older homes as the top housing solution

**55.6%**
High housing costs and limited availability (56.9% / 55.6%)

**POTENTIAL COORDINATING PARTNERS (TO CONFIRM)**
SENDD, SEND, Inc., SENAHC, municipalities

**POTENTIAL PROGRESS INDICATORS · 2027–2031**
Housing assessments; sites inventoried; housing projects assisted

GOAL 4

# 4 Childcare

**Proposed objective:** Improve affordable, reliable childcare access to support working families and regional workforce participation.

- **4.1** Continue advocacy for accessible childcare.
- **4.2** Prepare and pursue eligible childcare-related grants.
- **4.3** Explore applicable childcare tax credits and financial incentives.
- **4.4** Prioritize affordable childcare options, especially in underserved rural areas.
- **4.5** Continue coordination with area EDOs and childcare stakeholders.

## Related findings

**2.44 / 5**

Childcare survey rating, the lowest rating received

**POTENTIAL COORDINATING PARTNERS (TO CONFIRM)**

SENDD, EDOs, childcare providers, communities

**POTENTIAL PROGRESS INDICATORS · 2027–2031**

Stakeholder meetings; grant applications; initiatives supported

GOAL 5

# 5 Infrastructure, Broadband, and Economic Resilience

**Proposed objective:** Strengthen essential infrastructure, reliable broadband, and the region's capacity to anticipate, withstand, and recover from disruptions.

### INFRASTRUCTURE

- **5.1** Use information gathered through 6R1N to identify infrastructure gaps and needs, and maintain the regional map where access and ownership permit.
- **5.2** Continue supporting eligible infrastructure projects through state and federal grant programs.
- **5.3** Advocate for state and federal infrastructure investment opportunities.
- **5.4** Work with member communities to assess infrastructure priorities and program eligibility.
- **5.5** Encourage counties and communities to develop and maintain Capital Improvement Plans (CIPs).

### BROADBAND

- **5.6** Advocate for broadband investment through applicable state and federal programs, including BEAD and USDA opportunities where eligible.
- **5.7** Promote affordable, reliable, high-quality, future-ready broadband networks.
- **5.8** Hold routine coordination meetings with the Nebraska broadband office.
- **5.9** Meet regularly with community leaders, EDOs, state partners, and broadband providers.
- **5.10** Pursue broadband funding when available and eligible.
- **5.11** Continue surveying and mapping broadband needs, including precision agriculture and small businesses.

### RESILIENCE

- **5.12** Coordinate with emergency management and economic development partners to identify critical infrastructure vulnerabilities and strengthen business continuity and recovery information-sharing.

## Related findings

**41.7%**
Aging infrastructure: the #1 named issue

**40 of 51**
Communities reporting fair or poor water systems

**36.1%**
Insurance and utility disruption risk

**POTENTIAL COORDINATING PARTNERS (TO CONFIRM)**

SENDD, communities, utilities, broadband and emergency management partners

**POTENTIAL PROGRESS INDICATORS · 2027–2031**

CIPs supported; infrastructure grants; broadband needs mapped; resilience coordination

GOAL 6

# 6 Parks, Recreation, Arts, and Community Amenities

**Proposed objective:** Enhance community livability through recreation, public amenities, arts, and cultural opportunities.

- **6.1** Pursue eligible grants for parks, recreation, trails, and public amenities.
- **6.2** Assist eligible communities in pursuing Nebraska Creative District designations.
- **6.3** Support community-led improvements to public spaces and cultural amenities.

## Related findings

**58.3%**
Recreation (Quality of Place priority)

**36.1%**
Downtown revitalization

**POTENTIAL COORDINATING PARTNERS (TO CONFIRM)**
SENDD, communities, arts and recreation partners

**POTENTIAL PROGRESS INDICATORS · 2027–2031**
Grant applications; community projects; Creative District assistance

# Proposed Implementation Approach

The table below is a preliminary implementation framework for stakeholder review, not a statement of partner commitments or approved budgets. SENDD and partners should confirm leads, sequencing, costs, funding eligibility, and targets before final adoption.

| Goal | Potential coordinating partners (to confirm) | Illustrative timing | Potential progress indicators |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Rural economy** | SENDD, local EDOs, municipalities, business and agricultural partners | 2027–2031 | Businesses assisted; DTR applications supported; partner meetings |
| **Workforce** | SENDD, EDOs, training providers, employers | 2027–2031 | Employer consultations; training partnerships; funding applications |
| **Housing** | SENDD, SEND, Inc., SENAHC, municipalities | 2027–2031 | Housing assessments; sites inventoried; housing projects assisted |
| **Childcare** | SENDD, EDOs, childcare providers, communities | 2027–2031 | Stakeholder meetings; grant applications; initiatives supported |
| **Infrastructure and resilience** | SENDD, communities, utilities, broadband and emergency management partners | 2027–2031 | CIPs supported; infrastructure grants; broadband needs mapped; resilience coordination |
| **Community amenities** | SENDD, communities, arts and recreation partners | 2027–2031 | Grant applications; community projects; Creative District assistance |

# Evaluation and Annual Review

*Proposed framework.* SENDD may compile annual activity measures from grant and technical-assistance records, partner updates, and project inventories, and compare them with regional outcome indicators where reliable data are available.

# Economic Resilience and Coordination

Resilience is a cross-cutting consideration in business diversification, workforce capacity, housing, water and transportation systems, broadband, and local amenities. Proposed coordination should include:

- Ongoing infrastructure risk identification.
- Links to relevant hazard mitigation and recovery plans.
- An information-sharing network connecting local governments, EDOs, utilities, employers, and emergency management partners before and after disruptions.

# Appendix B. Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **BEAD** | Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment |
| **CDBG** | Community Development Block Grant |
| **CIP** | Capital Improvement Plan |
| **DTR** | Downtown Revitalization |
| **EDO** | Economic development organization |
| **HOME** | HOME Investment Partnerships Program |
| **LIHTC** | Low-Income Housing Tax Credit |
| **NEDA** | Nebraska Economic Developers Association |
| **SENDD** | Southeast Nebraska Development District |
| **USDA** | U.S. Department of Agriculture |