

## State of the City Address

After months of community engagement, in 2022 the city published a City Comprehensive Plan that set the **vision** for Vergas thru the year 2036. Plans are successful only to the extent that they can be executed. The Comprehensive Plan outlined 58 strategies for a future oriented vision of Vergas. The end of 2023, 50% of the strategies had some form of action and progress. At year end 2024 that increased to 69%. I would recommend taking a moment to review the progress of the Comprehensive Plan as this address cannot possibly touch on each strategy and the actions. I would add, the progress made did not just happen through the efforts of city staff and the city council. It is the collective effort and dedication of the city advisory councils, other community groups and numerous individuals.

The Comprehensive Plan identified parking, housing and business as the top focus for the future of Vergas. Since rolling out the plan, 33 downtown parking spaces have been created; through diagonal parking and a downtown parking lot. In terms of housing, there have been 3 new housing additions, with one of the additions addressing affordable housing. Overall, the new housing additions reflect 51 new housing lots. Currently there are 10 remaining available.

In terms of business, the EDA and Community Club are instrumental to the ongoing support of our community businesses. Of special note this year is the EDA grant with CEDA (Community & Economic Development Associates) for rural capacity programming. The grant provided \$15,000 in funding and 150 technical support hours. A "First Impressions" review and a Business needs survey were conducted, which led to a Business Façade Improvement Program that is currently being offered to provide matching funds for local business to make outside building improvements.

There have been other established partnerships occurring this year important to the growth and sustainability of Vergas. An energy grant through ESMC (Empowering Small Minnesota Communities) and RSDP (Regional Sustainability & Development Program) provided valuable funding, currently at \$50,000.00, & additional resources with the ultimate goal of municipal building energy efficiency and integration of clean energy. A number of other partners are part of the support to Vergas as CERTS (Clean Energy Resource Team), CSBR (Center for Sustainable Building Research), WCI (West Central Initiative, GreenStep Program, and OTPC (Otter Tail Power Company). The end result will be an energy plan with implementation recommendations that will have financial savings for the city and residents. It will also address community resiliency with improved energy planning and emergency planning.

Other partnerships have been established this year, including implementing a pilot program with Otter Tail County to provide shoreland permitting and inspection services. Additionally, with the new Engineer at the Otter Tail County Highway Department, there has been new opportunity for collaboration in addressing railroad delays, streets and sidewalks.

A common theme became apparent when drafting this year's address. Important to the success of Vergas is planning, relationships, and partnerships at the local, region, county and state level.

Though there is always background work being conducted in establishing, updating & improving city policies and processes; I would be remised if I did not note the important work of the Planning Commission this past year in updating the city zoning map and completing a codification process of all city ordinances. This is a huge undertaking that ensures current and applicable property designations and ordinances for the City of Vergas. Public hearing and approval remains pending for the updated ordinances.

This is my 4<sup>th</sup> and final State of the City Address and when reflecting upon my 6 years of service (2 city council & 4 as mayor), I'm reminded of the quote by Margaret Mead; Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. I've been impressed with the passion and engagement of so many individuals and groups in the community who contribute to the success of Vergas. What I've ultimately experienced is **"You can accomplish big things in a small town."**