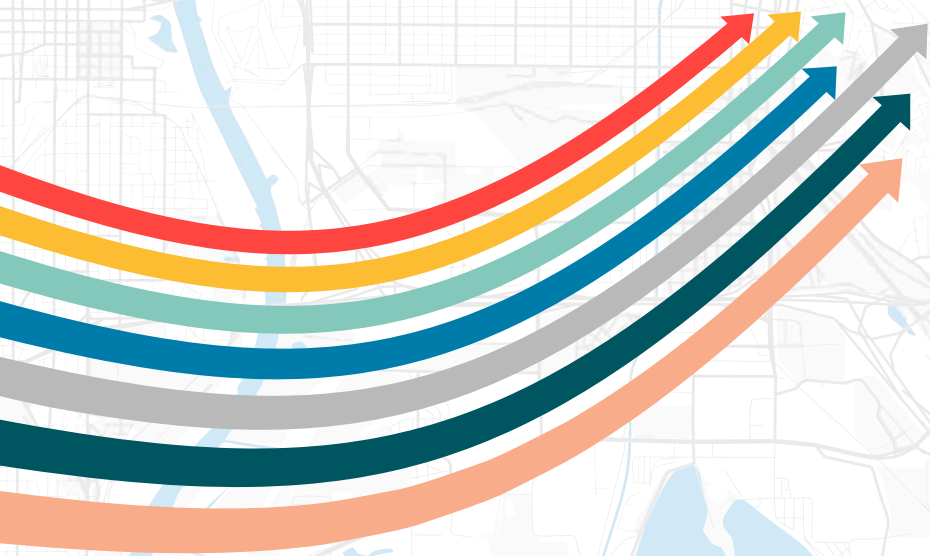




4

**REGIONAL
ASSESSMENT**



4. REGIONAL ASSESSMENT

Overview

Based on the current data and trends assessed in Chapters 2 and 3, a number of assumptions can be drawn concerning the overall economic and social welfare of the MAPA region. However, data alone are not sufficient to capture a well-rounded assessment. MAPA solicited input from its member communities and stakeholders to collect qualitative information in order to validate and supplement the quantitative findings.

MAPA distributed a community and economic development survey to the municipal jurisdictions in the agency's region. MAPA staff also facilitated focus groups and conducted interviews with economic developers and stakeholders in an effort to seek out anecdotal views and attitudes regarding the current state and future outlook of the region.

Community Surveys and Stakeholder Interviews

An online survey was distributed to the municipalities within the MAPA region's six counties. The survey asked 19 questions relevant to local economic development and community planning. One question asked responders to identify perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (also known as a "SWOT"

analysis) concerning their communities and the greater region. The following responses do not represent every individual submission. Instead, responses have been condensed into general themes for the purposes of reducing redundancy and limiting misinterpretation.



COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

- Location (i.e. ability to live in suburban or rural communities near a mid-sized urban metro; access to rural and urban amenities)
 - Productive workforce with strong work ethic
 - Affordable cost of living
 - Quality of life amenities (e.g., parks and green space, entertainment and cultural amenities, and safe communities among others)
 - Strong sense of community engagement among residents
 - Quality local schools and nearby presence of community colleges and public and private universities
-

COMMUNITY WEAKNESSES

- Aging infrastructure or lack of adequate infrastructure to support new growth
- Aging/dilapidated rural downtowns
- Cost to acquire land and build new housing
- Declining/aging population – and subsequent decreases in local tax revenue
- Deteriorating housing stock in certain neighborhoods and rural communities
- Lack of affordable housing in certain neighborhoods and rural communities
- Lack of varied housing types for different resident demographics
- Lack of new housing in rural communities – developers/builders are occupied primarily in the suburbs and urban fringes
- Lack of incentives/resources to attract businesses (locally and/or at the state level)
- Maintaining affordable utility rates in communities with declining or stagnant growth



COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES

- Continued investments in transportation infrastructure and regional trails systems
 - Rehabilitation of downtown commercial districts to retain and attract small businesses
 - Adaptive reuse of buildings or spaces that no longer have function (e.g. shuttered school buildings closed due to population decline, district consolidation)
 - Young families relocating or returning to communities throughout the region
-

COMMUNITY THREATS

- Location (i.e. difficulty retaining local businesses and services when in proximity to a larger population center)
- Lack of buildable land due to urban and/or natural geography
- Lack of workforce (or non-speculative) housing to accommodate would-be residents
- Maintaining and growing local economies outside of the urbanized metro area
- Maintaining local identity in the face of changing community and economic dynamics
- Small workforce pool from which to fill open jobs and support local business expansion
- Retaining youth / limiting “brain drain”
- Slow or stagnant growth
- Uncertainty with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the economy



The survey also asked communities to identify and rank at least their top three topics or issues by importance. Infrastructure development (water, sewer, roads, etc.) received the highest number of overall selections and the most first place selections. Housing and broadband/telecommunications ranked second and third, respectively. Downtown revitalization and land use planning were also selected frequently. Other topics that were ranked in the top three but with less frequency included: financing economic development, flood protection, transportation issues, incentive programs (TIF, tax abatement, etc.), and tourism/marketing. Communities that specified their infrastructure needs most necessary to increase or ensure continued economic investment cited downtown building repair and rehabilitation, fiber internet, water and wastewater treatment capacity upgrades, water and wastewater treatment facility improvements or new construction, and street repair/resurfacing.

MAPA facilitated discussions with executive directors and support staff from the five economic development organizations that represent each county in the MAPA region. These organizations compose part of the **Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership**, which is a consortium that leads many of the economic

development efforts throughout the MAPA and larger Omaha-Council Bluffs regions. The Partnership's economic development activities concern business attraction and intelligence, entrepreneurship and innovation, public policy, and talent and workforce among other areas. The Partnership members which MAPA frequently collaborates with and solicited input for the 2020 CEDS update include the **Greater Omaha Chamber** (City of Omaha), **Cass County Nebraska Economic Development Council**, **Gateway Development Corporation** (Washington County), **Sarpy County Economic Development Corporation**, and **Advance Southwest Iowa Corporation** (Pottawatomie County). The **Mills County Economic Development Foundation**, though independent of the Partnership, was also consulted in this latest CEDS development process.

Professional development stakeholders were asked to convey insights on the current state of the region in an attempt to add further context to the data presented in the preceding chapters and the input received from participating communities. This feedback has been classified and presented under six focus areas which were determined to be the most applicable. They include:



EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR

- The region has a productive, well-trained labor force.
 - The region benefits by having two community colleges and various workforce development resources that provide training for trades and other skills that do not require a four-year degree.
 - Efforts must continue to align today's workforce training needs with educational pathways and curriculums.
 - Immigrants with professional skills and backgrounds have difficulty finding opportunities in the region. Cultural and language barriers contribute to the problem, but social factors are responsible as well.
 - The challenges of an aging workforce are becoming more present. In the coming years, it is anticipated that the number of workers leaving the labor force will equal, if not exceed, the number of new entrants, creating staffing capacity concerns and gaps in organizational leadership.
-

FINANCING AND COST OF DOING BUSINESS

- Cost of living is below the national average and competitive with regions of similar size and demographics.
- There are well-established philanthropic resources throughout the region that aid in social and economic development.
- The lack of large incentive packages and venture capital programs place the region at a competitive disadvantage in attracting outside investment.
- Most economic incentives available in the region are relatively rigid and do not adequately address economic development needs in areas of disinvestment.
- Few incentives or resources (e.g. micro-lending) exist for small businesses.



HOUSING

- There is a lack of affordable housing throughout the region, especially where job centers are located.
 - There is limited mixed housing development in the region, both in the urban and rural areas.
 - There is not enough workforce housing available or being built for residents who desire to live in or near the communities they work.
-

INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORTATION

- Eppley Airfield has capacity to expand both passenger and cargo service. Passenger service is provided to both coasts and has added the number of direct flights to more than 30 destinations.
- The presence of Interstates 80 and 29 provide continued opportunities for development in jurisdictions where those corridors traverse.
- Infrastructure in many parts of the region is inadequate to support new businesses and business expansion.
- Although improvements have been made, reliable and affordable broadband is not consistent throughout the entire region.



LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT

- There is limited availability of industrial park space and state-of-the-art industrial areas/buildings, particularly large-scale industrial sites served by rail.
- Soil contamination due to lead in eastern Omaha continues to pose health and safety risks to residents. Remediation continues but it is a painstaking process.
- Brownfields remediation and wetland mitigation are often detriments to development.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

- The Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership network exists and includes a public/private cooperative for unified marketing of the region.
- The local governments in the region support cooperative agreements for services including law enforcement and emergency medical response, joint purchasing, and exchange of water and sewer resources.
- Doing business and providing services in two states can be challenging – intergovernmental cooperation is required.



Summary of the Economic State of the MAPA Region

Overall, the economy of the MAPA region has demonstrated growth and resilience since the last five-year CEDS update. Unemployment is below the national average consistently, personal and household incomes are in range with U.S. averages – despite lower than average annual wages, and cost of living remains low and competitive. The region's success can be attributed to a productive, skilled, and educated workforce, a diversified economy anchored by successful companies, strong educational and health care institutions, the presence of Offutt Air Force Base and U.S. Strategic Command, as well as a centralized location with a serviceable transportation network in proximity to various major national markets. These and other factors have enabled the MAPA region to see continued population growth, almost 14 percent overall since the 2010 census. Douglas and Sarpy Counties are at the center of that growth and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future, although natural development barriers exist in both jurisdictions that will influence land use and development decisions.

Although growth in the MAPA region's most populous counties has been strong, rural areas have experienced population stagnation or decline. As referenced in Chapter 1, 12 communities have seen trending population decline since 2010 and earlier. Smaller rural communities in the MAPA region are challenged to retain popula-

tion, businesses, and services when the bulk of jobs and employment opportunities are more and more centered in Omaha and adjacent communities. Furthermore, many segments of the population have migrated out of small towns and denser, older neighborhoods to more subdivisions developed recently in the suburbs and rural areas used previously for agriculture. The viability of rural communities is complicated by the age, condition, and availability of housing. Attracting or incentivizing new housing – particularly workforce housing – has been a common concern among communities in the MAPA region's rural counties.

While much of the MAPA region's new growth is in areas undeveloped previously, urban communities like Omaha and Council Bluffs have seen a resurgence in infill redevelopment and adaptive reuse. The movement toward and prevalence of infill redevelopment caters to changing demographics and preferences. Young professionals – generally white-collar professionals in their 20s and 30s – are a coveted demographic that cities and regions strive to retain or attract by fostering more transit-oriented and mixed-use development that offers cultural, economic, and social amenities. Strides have been made in the efficiency and reliability of the urban area's public transit system operated by **Metro**, and the region's first Bus Rapid Transit line (**ORBT**) that is set to launch in November of 2020



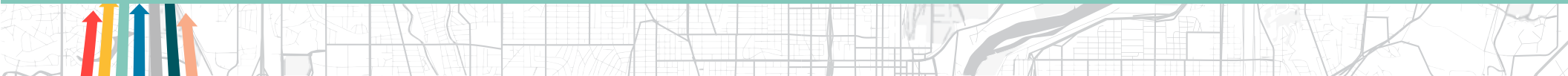
should make the region more competitive in attracting workforce talent and innovative businesses, and improve connectivity to employment opportunities for low-income individuals.

Infill redevelopment, like in most other cities, is prevalent in neighborhoods where there has been disinvestment, and where there is a higher concentration of minority and low income residents. This is true in the MAPA region's urban communities. Redevelopment, although a boon to the local tax base, raises the cost of living for housing typically, which prices out residents who are more likely to be vulnerable socially and economically. Those most vulnerable to rising costs and economic uncertainty reside predominantly in the older and more densely populated urban center of the MAPA region, which encompasses eastern Omaha, western Council Bluffs, and pockets of Bellevue. This area has experienced educational attainment, employment, and personal and household incomes far below the region as a whole historically. The continued disinvestment over time can be attributed to the changing economy and location of job

centers, lack of transportation options to those job centers, and the proliferation of suburban growth among other social and economic factors. Economic conditions in these urban neighborhoods are often overshadowed by the overall success demonstrated on a region-wide scale.

Aside from the issues of urban disinvestment and economic equity, the greater MAPA region has experienced other prominent challenges recently. Like the rest of the country, the region's communities, residents, and businesses are grappling with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020, the states of Nebraska and Iowa issued measures that shut down effectively the majority of "nonessential" businesses. Although neither state issued stay at home orders, normal daily business and commercial activities were hindered to an extent never before seen by current generations.

The commercial sector has absorbed the greatest brunt of the economic downturn throughout the ongoing pandemic. Businesses



that were forced to shutter entirely between mid-March and early May included retail, food services and drinking establishments, leisure and hospitality, entertainment and gaming venues, and businesses that rely generally on foot traffic and where consumers spend disposable income typically. COVID-19 has resulted in the unemployment or furlough of thousands and potentially the permanent closure of numerous small businesses all throughout the region. Local government sales, hotel/motel, and restaurant taxes have declined. Restrictions have been eased gradually in order to stimulate commerce and avoid further economic harm, but most businesses are operating under controls that limit occupancy thus reducing revenue and the need to hire at normal capacity. It is uncertain how long it will be until normal or near-normal resumption of economic activities reach pre-pandemic levels.

MAPA communities in Nebraska and Iowa are still recovering from 2019's historic floods that resulted in statewide Presidential Disaster Declarations. Several communities in the MAPA region such as

Arlington, Bellevue, Plattsmouth, Valley, and Waterloo, Nebraska, and Glenwood and Pacific Junction, Iowa, experienced significant damage to infrastructure, residential properties, and local businesses. Reports from local jurisdictions and FEMA estimate that 2,675 residential properties and 545 business properties sustained flood-related damage.

Recovery and flood mitigation planning are priorities for communities like Pacific Junction in Mills County and Plattsmouth in Cass County. Projects for which affected communities have received or will require funding assistance likely include floodplain property acquisitions, infrastructure repair or replacement, and long-range planning and emergency coordination. This most recent flood event – the second in less than a decade – underscores the need to facilitate planning and to implement projects that increase the resiliency of infrastructure, neighborhoods, and businesses against future flooding and other potential hazards.

