



BIWABIK

THE HOME OF GIANTS RIDGE

Minnesota

2021-2025

STRATEGIC PLAN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2021, the City of Biwabik engaged Northspan to conduct a strategic planning process. The goals of the process were to clarify and/or identify the following:

- Strategic Directions for next 5 years
- Accomplishments by which the strategic directions are achievable
- Establish a timeline and priorities among the identified strategic actions

Northspan conducted a wide-reaching community engagement survey and facilitated a community engagement workshop to bring extensive input into the process. The survey and workshop created the community informed practical vision for the process, which in turn framed the creation of the strategic directions by the City of Biwabik Strategy Committee. The Strategy Committee created, refined, and established a timeline for the strategic directions over the course of four sessions. The community informed practical vision and strategic directions that emerged from this process are:

Community Informed Practical Vision:

- Responsive and transparent city government
- New, diverse businesses
- Maintained infrastructure
- Enhanced community recreational amenities
- Shared community vision
- Vibrant Main Street
- Blight reduction strategy implemented
- Variety of affordable housing options

Strategic Directions:

1. Enhancing and promoting amenities
2. Encouraging and facilitating economic development
3. Creating a sense of community through engagement
4. Reconnecting with community

This document provides an overview of the new strategic plan, which will guide City of Biwabik’s work for the next five years. Details on the planning process and supporting documents from that process are available in the appendices.

OVERVIEW

The City of Biwabik, a community on Minnesota's Iron Range, sought a new strategic plan with considerable community engagement to guide its activities from 2022-2026. It conducted extensive survey work, held a community engagement workshop, and tasked elected and appointed leadership with building out an achievable plan with clear action steps.

The city formed a strategy committee to guide the planning process. Committee members included the five-member city council (including its mayor) and two three-member commissions, one for planning and one for public utilities. City staff invited to participate included a city administrator, a deputy clerk, a utility clerk, fire chief, and Gilbert police chief. (The City of Biwabik contracts with the City of Gilbert for shared public safety services.) These 16 individuals drew on extensive community engagement and contributed their own insights to refine the plan.

Past efforts also informed the creation of the new strategic plan. The city most recently completed a strategic planning process in 2009, though it completed comprehensive plan updates and additional smaller-scale planning in more recent years. The city has sought community engagement through many of these efforts and has also sought to integrate its efforts into broader regional efforts through entities such as the East Range Joint Powers Board, Range Association of Municipalities and Schools, and the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation. The new strategic plan reflects an effort to build on existing foundations and connections to build a cohesive strategic plan for the entire city.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

According to the 2019 American Community Survey from the U.S. Census, the City of Biwabik has a population of 972. It sits near the eastern end of Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range along Minnesota Highway 135, with Gilbert to its west and Aurora to its east. Like many of its neighboring communities, Biwabik faces challenges as it adapts to an aging population, shifts in the local economy, and the need to manage and upgrade its amenities, building stock, and infrastructure.

While historically a mining-focused community like many of its neighbors, Biwabik is also home to Giants Ridge, a destination skiing and golf resort owned by the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation. The community includes a traditional town center along its Main Street, an area known for its Bavarian architectural theme and town park, but also includes properties along Embarrass, Wynne, and Sabin Lakes in the Giants Ridge area. Against this backdrop of a multifaceted community and changes in demographics and economics, Biwabik sought to launch an intentional planning process to ensure all voices are at the table and engaged.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2021 – 2025

This strategic plan is the culmination of a planning process that began in August 2021. The planning provided new strategic directions and established action steps and outcomes to advance the strategic directions. The strategic directions provide a renewed focus and direction for the City of Biwabik that will help move it toward its desired outcomes.

Community Informed Practical Vision:

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SD1: ENHANCING AND PROMOTING AMENITIES

Definition:

This strategic direction acknowledges the diverse array of natural and built amenities that makes Biwabik a unique community. It recognizes the differing maintenance statuses of many of these amenities and the minimal coordinated marketing around them. It seeks to rectify these shortcomings and move toward a cohesive maintenance plan, community awareness, and greater usage of the amenities.

Action Steps:

- A1. Determine the process to utilize the school district's electronic sign to market community events and amenities
- A2. Update campground website for mobile users
- A3. Seek representation on the Iron Range Tourism Bureau board
- A4. Inventory community amenities and determine responsible party or owner
- A5. Update city website for mobile users and connect more clearly to area resources and amenities
- A6. Determine deferred maintenance plan for amenities and identify potential funding mechanisms
- A7. Identify and utilize area partners to market amenities (e.g., Iron Range Tourism Bureau and East Range Joint Powers Board [ERJPB])
- A8. Work with the ERJPB and Mesabi East superintendent to revive the Joint Recreation Committee to create a vision for utilizing East Range communities' amenities

Outcomes:

- Plan in place addressing deferred maintenance
- Increased awareness and usage of city amenities
- Increased revenue for private business and Giants Ridge
- Year-round schedule of community events
- Updated beach house
- Commitment from school district recreation director to hold events in Biwabik
- Increased city revenue for pavilion rentals, etc.

SD2: ENCOURAGING AND FACILITATING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Definition:

This strategic direction notes the crucial role of economic development for Biwabik's future. It recognizes both assets such as natural resources, updated infrastructure, and Giants Ridge and challenges such as dated housing stock, updates needed at commercial spaces, and some logistical issues. It works with regional partners to respond to the needs of existing businesses, build a stronger community message, and attract new investment.

Action Steps:

- A1. Support housing developers seeking regional or state funding
- A2. Develop and launch business retention and expansion program including building owners and share the city's strategic plan during these visits
- A3. Work with partners to promote the entrepreneurial incubator space in city hall
- A4. Work with Iron Range Resources & Rehabilitation (IRRR) to build a Business Energy Retrofit and Downtown Storefront fund to encourage mixed-use development and preservation of the core commercial area and the Bavarian theme
- A5. Create a "We want you, grow your business here!" outreach plan
- A6. Attract and encourage remote workers to live in Biwabik

Outcomes:

- Increased number of businesses
- Increased access to quality, affordable child care
- Increased tax capacity
- Increased access to quality, affordable broadband
- Updated, up to code, and rehabilitated storefronts preserving the Bavarian theme
- New housing projects in the community
- New rehabilitation housing projects in the community

SD3: CREATING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

Definition:

This strategic direction emphasizes the importance of creating a welcoming, collaborative community. It acknowledges the fractured nature of existing information-sharing methods and the reliance of a small group of volunteers for many community events. It creates a plan for intentional outreach to bring new participants into the process and better share information on happenings in Biwabik.

Action Steps:

- A1. Conduct outreach to grow stronger relationships with homeowner associations
- A2. Create a regular physical newsletter done in color to supplement and steer people to the digital version
- A3. Hold an annual town hall or state of the city event

Outcomes:

- Increased number of newsletter subscribers, open rates, and click rates
- Increased number of events with larger attendance
- Greater participation from community in city council and other city-led community meetings
- More engagement on community event committees
- Increased number of applicants for planning and zoning, public utilities commission, or running for council

SD4: RECONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY

Definition:

This strategic direction seeks to increase awareness of and participation in City of Biwabik affairs. It seeks to improve access to city meetings and better share information on issues of importance to the community. It builds partnerships with community groups, local media, and regional organizations to fully utilize their capacities.

Action Steps:

A1. Enhance city meeting agendas to include plain language explaining upcoming meeting highlights and issues

A2. Research and install improved technology for hybrid, live-streamed city meetings

A3 Develop a simple event submission form for the public or community groups to use

A4. Build a stronger relationship with BACA to fully utilize their capabilities

A5. Engage with local partners to share Biwabik community events on their platforms (e.g., Iron Range Tourism, Hello Iron Range, Giants Ridge, and RAMS)

A6. Determine local news media contacts, understand their communication methods, and how best to engage them

Outcomes:

- Council meetings are more interactive; people can easily speak at and hear council meetings
- Increased number of people physically or virtually attending meetings
- Increased coverage from Mesabi Tribune, etc. of current activities in the area

TIMELINES AND PRIORITIES

With its accomplishments in place, the City of Biwabik strategy committee then further defined the strategic plan timeline. This stage of the planning process gives stakeholders an accurate understanding of when certain tasks may be completed, and it seeks to space out actions to balance the workload for staff and community volunteers. Strategy committee members determined start and end times by quarter for each strategic action. Finally, the group identified the action steps in the first quarter that it considered most catalytic for future efforts. The timeline is available in the appendix titled City of Biwabik Strategic Plan Timeline.

APPENDICES

1. Strategic Planning Processes
2. Biwabik Community Informed Survey FINAL Summary 9.15.21
3. City of Biwabik Community Engagement Strategies, Community Informed Practical Vision and Strategic Directions 9.20.21
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STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The City of Biwabik has prepared this five-year strategic plan to guide its activities and achieve accomplishments consistent with the group's vision and mission. The strategic process steps, session dates, and agendas are included as an attachment, as are the results of the sessions that followed.

PROCESS STEPS

1. Collection of background information
2. Environmental scan survey with community members
3. 08.30.21 Community Engagement Workshop
4. 09.20.21 Strategy Planning Session 1 of 4
5. 09.27.21 Strategy Planning Session 2 of 4
6. 10.05.21 Strategy Planning Session 3 of 4
7. 10.18.21 Strategy Planning Sessions 4 of 4
8. 10.25.21 – 10.28.21 Draft Strategic Plan Review & Feedback
9. 11.08.21 Strategic Plan City Council Presentation
10. Complete a 90-day check-in

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP

AGENDA | August 30, 2021 | 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM

- | | |
|------|---|
| 6:00 | Welcome, Agenda, & Introductions |
| 6:15 | Community Informed Survey Results to Date |
| 6:30 | Strategies Workshop |
| 7:55 | Next Steps |
| 8:00 | Adjourn |

On August 30, Northspan facilitated an engagement workshop with over 35 community members and local stakeholders at the Biwabik Pavilion. The event was open to the general public and sought to capture a broad range of public opinion. The attendees received a presentation on the community informed survey results, an overview of local demographics and the economy, and contributed their insights. They then affirmed a practical vision for the strategic planning process based on the survey results and developed action and efforts that could move the city toward that practical vision. The survey results are available in the appendix titled Biwabik Community Informed Survey FINAL Summary 9.15.21 and the session outcomes are available in the appendix titled City of Biwabik Community Engagement Strategies, Community Informed Practical Vision and Strategic Directions 9.20.21.

CONTEXT PRESENTATION & STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS STRATEGIC PLANNING SESSION 1 of 4

AGENDA | September 20, 2021 | 5:30 PM-8:30 PM

- 5:30 Welcome, Agenda, & Introductions
- 5:45 Demographic Data & Economic Trends Analysis
- 5:55 Community Informed Survey Results
- 6:10 Strategic Directions Workshop
- 8:20 Next Steps
- 8:30 Adjourn

On September 20, Northspan facilitated the first of four strategic planning sessions with the strategy committee. It included final results of the community informed survey, which reached 119 people, and a deeper exploration of demographic data and economic trends. The strategy committee then developed four strategic directions to guide the new strategic plan. These strategic directions are available in the appendix in the document titled City of Biwabik Strategy Committee Strategic Directions 09.20.21.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

1. Enhancing and promoting amenities
2. Encouraging and facilitating economic development
3. Creating a sense of community through engagement
4. Reconnecting with community

ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PART I STRATEGIC PLANNING SESSION 2 of 4

AGENDA | September 27, 2021 | 6:00 PM-8:00 PM

- 6:00 Welcome, Agenda, & Introductions
- 6:10 Focused Implementation Workshop Part 1 of 2
- 7:50 Next Steps
- 8:00 Adjourn

On September 27, Northspan facilitated a second workshop with strategy committee. In this session, the participants identified outcomes and accomplishments that could move the City of Biwabik toward two of its four strategic directions. These accomplishments and the ideas that led to their creation are available in the appendix in the document titled City of Biwabik Current Reality, Success Indicators & Accomplishments 09.27.21 and 10.05.21.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PART II

STRATEGIC PLANNING VIRTUAL SESSION 3 of 4

AGENDA | October 5, 2021 | 5:15 PM-6:15 PM

- 5:15 Welcome, Agenda, & Introductions
- 5:20 Focused Implementation Workshop Part 1 of 2
- 6:10 Next Steps
- 6:15 Adjourn

At the second accomplishments session, which took place virtually, participants identified outcomes and accomplishments for the remaining two strategic directions. These accomplishments and the ideas that led to their creation are available in the appendix in the document titled City of Biwabik Current Reality, Success Indicators & Accomplishments 09.27.21 and 10.05.21.

TIMELINES AND PRIORITIES

STRATEGIC PLANNING SESSION 4 of 4

AGENDA | September 27, 2021 | 6:00 PM-8:00 PM

- 6:00 Welcome, Agenda, & Introductions
- 6:10 Focused Implementation: Timeline
- 7:55 Next Steps
- 8:00 Adjourn

The City of Biwabik concluded its process by laying out timelines for the completion of the strategic actions that support each strategic direction. Once established, strategy committee members then identified several key actions in the first 90 days that they believed were essential for subsequent work. The priorities that rose to the top included:

- Support housing developers seeking regional or state funding (SD2 A1)
- Enhance city meeting agendas to include plain language explaining upcoming meeting highlights and issues (SD4 A1)
- Update campground website for mobile users (SD1 A2) as the starting point for several website-related actions

The group also discussed sharing the information in the strategic plan via a press release and with key partners, including the East Range Joint Powers Board, Range Association of Municipalities and Schools, the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation, Giants Ridge, and other area stakeholders. Community members emphasized the importance of keeping the plan front and center in coming months, including the potential printing of the strategic directions and posting them in City Hall. The complete timeline is available in the appendix titled City of Biwabik Strategic Plan Timeline.