

In 2022 Vergas completed a City Comprehensive Plan that set the shared vision for the community thru the year 2036. In 2023, the city began the steps to move Vergas toward the Vision. The Comprehensive Plan is comprised of 58 strategic actions across components of Land Use, Housing, Transportation, Business & Economic Development, Public Services & Facilities, and Parks & Open Spaces. At the time of the one year mark of the plan; beginning steps and progress was noted in 29 (50%) of the 58 strategic actions.

It would be difficult to touch on every aspect, but I would like to highlight some of the key steps taken in moving Vergas forward this past year.

Parking was voiced as a priority in the comprehensive plan. The City of Vergas secured the lot where the Otter Tail County Garage was located. The city paid OTC \$1 for the lot and received an OTC Community Growth grant for a 50/50 cost split for removal of the garage. Work was completed with the lot; with parking available in late November. In the spring of 2024 there will finishing touches of asphaltting, parking lines and fencing to offer the community 21 new parking spaces.

Housing was another priority identified in the Plan; which entailed expanding the supply of affordable housing and transition housing for seniors. There are 51 new housing lots available in the city limits of Vergas. This reflects 3 new housing developments; Lawrence Lake Acres (24), Keily Shores (16), and Sunny Oaks (11). The Sunny Oaks development was tax forfeited land in Vergas, and in collaboration with OTC, the EDA/HRA secured purchase of 8 of the 11 lots at \$1 each and OTC will have 3 lots with a future plan for 6 Senior Living Units. The sale of the lots in Sunny Oaks Development will allow Vergas to recoup some of the cost of the infrastructure (water/sewer) that had been previously placed in the development. Also, in collaboration with OTC, the City approved the Community Growth Partnership Grant Program, which can be applied for new housing. The tax rebate program also remains an available option to support affordability of building a home.

There has been significant background work to address the components of transportation and land use in the community. This has entailed a Street Condition Survey and pavement management plan. For street planning Vergas has 6.3 miles of local streets; 2.7 of this is gravel. With new housing developments; street planning and management will expand. The Planning Commission is doing important work addressing a number of street issues, reviewing and updating the city zoning map and updating ordinances to support commercial, residential, recreation, and lake land. Noteworthy this past year, was the completion of a feasibility study that will increase the connectivity between Vergas and regional trails. The City approved the plan for the Heart of Lakes trail which would be aligned with the Otter Tail County Hwy 35 project; planned for 2024.

Park and open spaces in the comprehensive plan had strategies focused on community art, recreation, and public facilities at the long lake park. The Vergas Community Club and Vergas Arts Club have been instrumental to framing this vision. Vergas offers a number of events through-out the year, which has created a strong community identity. The Community Club added metal loon art throughout the community, placed a billboard displaying area lakes and community events and in concert with the city are working on decorative downtown street lights. The Youth Art Camp remains a highly visible and growing program featured in the downtown. The Vergas Art Club hosted 3 performing art programs (*Chmielewski band, Tony Debois, Siana Story Teller*) and held a studio crawl featuring area artists.

The Community Club and Arts Club also hosted an event “Loon Art for the Park” that not only promoted local creativity, but highlighted the importance of the loon to our community identity. The event also served as fundraising for long lake park improvements. The City Park Advisory Board completed work with NDSU on a proposed long lake park improvement plan, which was unveiled for community input. There is strong support for park improvements, however there remain challenges with the county and securing funds to fully accomplish. We appreciate the work of the Park Advisory Board who have on a continual basis been instrumental to ongoing park and recreation improvements.

In addition to the work focused on the strategies specifically outlined in the City Comprehensive Plan, the City completed improvements to the Vergas Event Center, secured new city office building to better meet increasing city needs and liquor store space needs, and established a cannabis ordinance in response to new Minnesota legalization legislation. The City has remained committed to the expanded use of technology to create cost effective efficiencies in city operations. Three new systems were purchased this year; an electronic time card system to improve processing, the Minibilling system to improve utility billing, and a 24 hour alert system (SCADA) to monitor and alarm in time when there are attention needs with the water plant and lift stations. Infrastructure and capital budgeting are certainly at the top of City concerns. The City is active in positioning the city for county, state, and federal funding opportunities and developing a plan to be proactive vs reactive for high cost capital improvements.

In summary, the comprehensive plan and the established vision statement for Vergas have driven a number of actions and accomplishments that aligns Vergas for continued success. I would add and express appreciation for what has been accomplished, the hours of work this represents, and the coordinated efforts with many partners in the community and beyond.

I’d like to finish with the Vergas VISION statement; as its important to keep in the forefront and link to plans, actions, and accomplishments.

The City of Vergas is a thriving community that we are proud to call home. We are committed to taking charge of our future and proud of our commitment to retaining its small-town charm; while continually improving our employment, housing, and technology. Our quality of life, friendly atmosphere, and sense of community help us retain residents as well as draw in visitors and new residents. Our community flourishes because of engaged community members, business owners, and leaders working together to advance and communicate common values, goals and priorities of the Vergas Comprehensive Plan.

I would contend though this represents a future vision; it clearly reflects the current state of Vergas!