



NORTH BRANCH —Minnesota—

Kevin Schieber
Mayor

Robert Canada
Councilmember/Acting Mayor

Travis Miles
Councilmember

Kelly Neider
Councilmember

Peter Schaps
Councilmember

**CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR AGENDA
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2024 @ 10:00 AM
CITY HALL, 6408 ELM STREET, NORTH
BRANCH, MN 55056**

1. CALL TO ORDER
2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE
3. ROLL CALL
4. SPECIAL SESSION ITEMS
 - a. Interview City Administrator Candidates ACTION
 - b. Selection of City Administrator ACTION
 - c. Assessment Report of Community Development Department and Director
Candidate Evaluation ACTION
5. ADJOURNMENT

Remote Participation*

Due to medical leave, Councilmember Canada will be participating remotely via iPad and/or phone connectivity from 4539 Isanti Trail, North Branch, Minnesota.

Since we do not have time to discuss every point presented, it may seem that decisions are preconceived. However, background information is provided to the City Council on each Agenda item in advance from Staff and appointed Commissions; and decisions are based on this information and past experiences. In addition some items may also have been discussed preliminarily at Council Work Sessions. If you are aware of information that has not been discussed, please raise your hand to be recognized. Comments that are pertinent are appreciated. Items requiring excessive time may be continued to another meeting.



Prepared By: Linda Woulfe, Interim City Administrator

Presenter: Jeff Weldon

Date: 09/19/2024

Board & Commission: City Council

**Subject: Assessment Report of Community Development Department and Director
Candidate Evaluation**

The City Council will be asked to accept the report and direct staff to prepare an offer letter to the recommended candidate.

Voting Requirements:

Voting Options Simple Majority

ASSESSMENT REPORT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT AND DIRECTOR CANDIDATE EVALUATION

**Prepared for the City of North Branch, MN
September 2024**

**Prepared by GMP Consultants
Jeffrey W. Weldon, Senior Consultant**

Introduction and statement of purpose

I am pleased to present the following report to the City of North Branch pursuant to our contract for services dated August 15 between the City and GMP Consultants. To fill the vacancy of the director's position in the Community Development Department, we undertook an analysis of the current position, structure and hierarchy of the department, as well as the scope of services within the purview of the department. The City Council has also expressed a strong interest in filling the vacant director's position with an internal employee, Mr. Nate Sondrol, a long-time employee who is the Parks Director/GIS Specialist. A candidate assessment is part of this report.

Prior to considering filling the position, the Council appropriately decided to undertake a comprehensive review of the department to see what changes might be warranted to best align the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the director position with the overall mission of the department. This also includes making possible adjustments to the department's work scope to ensure the department can best conduct their duties in a necessary proactive manner for the community. If, after considering attributes of the internal candidate and re-examining the mission of the Community Development Department, the City Council decides the proper alignment is insufficient or otherwise inadequate, the city can then undertake a comprehensive external search to fill the director position.

Stakeholder meetings

To conduct research to address the above-stated purpose, I met with several parties on September 4. They included:

- Mayor Schieber and members of the City Council
- Representative from East Central Regional Development Commission
- Representative from the Chamber of Commerce
- Representative of Chisago County Outreach
- School District Superintendent
- Two of the City's consulting engineers from WSB
- One long-time residential builder/developer
- Staff persons Public Works Director Shawn Williams, Building Official Rich Meyer, and Parks Director/GIS Specialist Nate Sondrol. Informal conversations were also held with Interim City Administrator Lynda Woulfe.

Attempts were made to meet with planning commission members and other realtors and developers, but they were not successful.

Current Status of the Department

The Community Development Department is currently a one-person department. The director's position is currently vacant. The department has not been able to keep up with the growth and development demands of the past several years of the community. As a result, the department has appropriately placed a priority on responding to development inquiries while some prospective, future long-term planning and visioning has become somewhat secondary. Responding to public inquiries, large and small as well as developer applications, has become the priority instead of sustained efforts at business recruitment, working with site selectors, and other large-scale, prospective initiatives. In addition, response time to inquiries and applications has also been adversely affected. None of this seems to be due to any technical or skill deficiency on the part of staff; rather, there is a mismatch between demand for services which has outpaced the department's resources to adequately service them. In the short term, the city has contracted with WSB to assist with some planning functions. To the city's credit, a housing study was recently completed which will drive much of the department's future workload in strategies yet to be determined.

All of this has forced the department to be reactive instead of sufficiently proactive.

The stakeholder responses were nearly unanimous in their opinion of two key facts: First, the department, despite its best efforts, needs to have better communication, improved response time to inquiries and applications, and needs to pivot to more proactive initiatives that better position the community for future development. Second, that the current state of the city has excellent staff. Mr. Sondrol received outstanding accolades from those he works with, internally and externally, for his knowledge, skills, abilities and professionalism.

In short, the department is doing the best it can with the resources it has but current service levels and processes could be re-tooled and improved. There also needs to be a more aggressive, strategic, and sustained approach to long-range visioning, economic development and growth planning, business recruitment and retention, branding and marketing, and grant procurement for projects.

Cultivating the right 'culture' for the Department

Perhaps more than most city departments, the office that handles planning and development quickly develops a very distinguished reputation throughout the community; one that is formed and promulgated by those with which it comes into contact. It is very easy for such departments to develop a negative reputation as being

“anti-development”, “hard to work with”, or just plain “non-responsive.” Whether it is deserved or not, most departments at one time or another are labeled as such.

The stakeholders I met with universally described the ‘reputation’ this department should have and is attempting to aspire to be known as. They used the following descriptors:

- Have a reputation as being pro-growth and pro-development while still adhering to the city’s quality development standards.
- Establish standards for turn-around time as quickly and efficiently as possible while still processing inquiries thoroughly, accurately, and professionally.
- Take the time to explain the reason for city policies and educate applicants.
- Proactively suggest alternatives to applicants’ plans that can still accomplish their goals but, in a manner and method that complies with applicable regulations. Strives to find ways to get to ‘yes’ and make suggestions for improvement or compliance.
- Understands the perspective of the applicant, recognizes that to developers, time is money, and it is in the city’s best interest their projects are successful.
- Works cooperatively with community partners to achieve economic and community development goals.
- Uses ‘outside the box’ critical thinking skills to develop innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to achieving economic and community development goals.
- Works successfully with other city departments to ensure good communication and cooperation in a teamwork fashion to maximize efficiency and effectiveness.
- Each rule and regulation must have a specific public policy purpose that supports the health, safety, and general welfare of the city and is not unnecessarily burdensome or overly regulatory.

Overall mission of the Department

The department should have two clearly defined areas of discipline: (1) community development, and (2) economic development. Although the two functions are related, they should not be confused as one in the same. Community development generally comprises planning and land use, zoning, subdivision regulations, code enforcement and administration, land use/property regulations, infrastructure planning and development, city facility location planning, comprehensive plan issues, land use site plans, and the like.

Economic development is primarily commerce and business development and growth, commercial and industrial recruitment, expansion and retention, marketing, and efforts

that lead to job creation and tax base expansion. Because they are related, it is appropriate to have their functions in the same department but have a clear, internal delineation of duties and functions of each discipline. Large municipalities often have the luxury of separating these two major functions into two departments. Alternatively, the economic development functions are often contracted to another private non-profit agency to which the city would have an arms-length, contractual relationship. Another option is a joint powers arrangement whereby economic development functions are done exclusively, or in partnership with, a regional development commission, the county, or some other larger-scale entity.

There should be adjustments to the department's duties and services and a clearer distinction between staff positions to whom these duties are assigned. In addition, other services are suggested that the city may not be doing now but will likely need to respond to in the future to effectively keep up with growth demands. This will necessitate revisions to job descriptions. Those duties are generally described under the respective staff positions below.

Modification of the current position of the GIS/Parks Planner position

It is recommended the department replace the current position of GIS/Parks Director with the position title of City Planner. All the duties of the GIS/Parks Director will be retained and still provided in the department, but the title of City Planner would more accurately reflect the duties prescribed to it. This would be considered a middle-management position in the City's organizational chart and report to the Community Development Director. The position title change is significant in terms of the ability to recruit candidates to back-fill this position. The title *City Planner* is a common position title and will resonate with potential applicants much better than the more obtuse job title *GIS/Parks Director*.

Bring Building Official and Building Inspections/Code Enforcement operations into this Department in the future when the Building Official position becomes vacant

This recommendation would transfer the stand-alone department of Building Inspections into the Community Development Department in the future. This would then also be considered a middle-management position, and the Building Official would oversee this division within the CD Department. Most communities have this function incorporated into either the Public Works or Community Development Departments. They are seldom stand-alone departments. Under this change, supervisory responsibility over the Building Official would be transferred to the Community Development Director and removed from the City Administrator. Direct supervision over building inspection and code enforcement services would still be under the direct supervision of the Building

Official. I would not recommend making this change until the Building Official position becomes vacant.

This change also positions the department to organizationally be able to respond if the city were, in the future, to expand into rental inspection and registration programs if the need arises. Such services should be under the purview of the Building Inspections Division of the CD Department.

It is important to note this change may have implications for compensation equity. If so, it would have to be addressed as part of a larger examination of the city's pay equity and comparable worth studies to ensure internal and external pay equity.

The following discussion delineates the department's responsibilities among Director and City Planner positions. It is important to note this departmental re-organization does not envision any additional staff for 2025. However, subsequent discussion in this document identifies the possibility of additional staff for 2026 and beyond to keep up with the service levels North Branch is expected to experience.

Community Development Director; general duties ("macro-planner")

- 1) Supervises the City Planner; develops and monitors departmental budget and appropriate portions of the CIP.
- 2) Signs-off on all plan/plat reviews conducted by subordinate staff and consultants.
- 3) Coordinates updates and oversees the comprehensive land use plan.
- 4) Formulates/develops long-term goals/plans for economic/community development or Planning Commission and City Council.
- 5) Staff liaison to Economic Development Authority, East Central Regional Development Commission, Chisago County HRA/EDA, and Chamber of Commerce.
- 6) Administers all business, commercial, industrial development recruitment and retention programs and activities.
- 7) Oversees all marketing and external communication/marketing efforts at economic development.
- 8) Manage efforts at grant procurement; applications and administration.
- 9) Administers creation of tax increment and "brownfield" districts and other financing programs.
- 10) Administers business and housing subsidy and any revolving loan fund programs.

- 11) Develops/recommends long-term goals and plans for community & economic development.
- 12) Prepares development agreements, contracts, and other legal documents in consultation with city attorney.
- 13) Develops RFPs for contracted services and works with contracted consultants.
- 14) Recommends code revisions in related areas.

City Planner; general duties (“micro-planner”)

- 1) Administers zoning, subdivision, annexations, and land use provisions of the code.
- 2) Oversees the GIS functions.
- 3) Responsible for site/facility planning for parks, facilities, trails, and other city infrastructure.
- 4) Conducts plan and plat reviews on land use and infrastructure applications.
- 5) Serves as respondent to front-counter, walk-in, telephone, email inquiries and questions from the public; processes all applications and permits related to zoning, land use, and subdivision regulations.
- 6) Serves as staff liaison to Planning and Parks, Trails and Open Space Commissions.
- 7) Works directly with public and private utilities, engineers, property owners, developers, contractors to oversee land development in accordance with approved plans.

(Note: The above is not intended to be an exhaustive re-write of job descriptions. Rather, it is intended to be a general, high-level description of the two positions.)

Administrative support for the Department

For any organization to be both effective and efficient, it must have the appropriate level of administrative and technical support. This requires clerical staff either exclusively in this department or shared with other departments depending upon workload. For example, it is neither effective nor efficient for top or middle management to have to perform the basic functions of assembling agenda packets or taking minutes at advisory board or commission meetings. They cannot effectively do their job assisting boards if they are concurrently taking meeting minutes. In addition, it is a waste of resources to have higher-paid department heads, or even middle management staff, assembling

agenda packets. For another example, middle or top management should not be administering special event permits or park shelter reservations. The city needs to ensure this department has the necessary clerical support to conduct these more basic functions.

Predicting future needs of the Department

In the face of expected continued growth and development of North Branch, it is important that the scope, depth, breadth, and timing of such growth be predicted. The city can then anticipate what and when services might need to be added to serve the community. For example, will there be a need to institute a **rental registration and inspection** program? Is there a need for a specific set of services that promote **affordable or workforce housing**? Efforts to attract business and industry will be for naught if the employees of these companies cannot find affordable housing.

Community identity and pride are often found in **local celebrations or annual community events**. While such events are often managed by a local chamber of commerce, tourism board, or community non-profit organizations, they often are sponsored in whole or in part by the city. Quite likely, these sponsors will seek city funding. Such events can also have a positive effect on local economic development by visitor spending on such items as gas, food, lodging, etc. If more direct support is envisioned for the community celebrations and events, that will also require additional staffing.

Successful efforts at growth management usually rely on a comprehensive **marketing and branding** function. While small items like updating the city logo or renting billboards may be important and can certainly help, a much larger and sustained effort is usually necessary. This will require resources and additional staff time.

Even if no new services are determined necessary, the magnitude and quantity of the existing workload is sure to increase as North Branch continues to grow.

It is vital the city continues to plan to invest in resources to meet that expected growth demand to avoid once again falling behind.

As such, it is recommended to carefully monitor workload service delivery and consider adding a **second planning position** to the Department for 2026. This position could be titled Assistant Planner, Planning Specialist, Planning Technician, or some other appropriate title and work under the general direction of the City Planner. To properly align growth with resources in the face of tight budgets for the short term, some additional services may be able to be achieved with community-based partnerships, part-time staff, and short-term consulting contracts. For example, GIS is a vital tool well-used by the city, but technological upgrades and further applications are assured.

Any of these efforts could be used to address growing GIS or marketing demands that are short of requiring additional full-time staff.

Community Development Director

Commensurate with the above description of duties of the director, I have examined the options of the city for filling this vacancy. Recruitment efforts outside the organization are standard practice but entities should always look to identify talent within their own organization. Efforts at staff development and training of existing employees pay dividends when there is an opportunity to promote from within. This effort can save time and money and provides for a much more efficient job ramp-up, or orientation of a new assignment. Still, even with internal talent, organizations may find it prudent to concurrently look at outside talent as a validation of promoting from within to make sure their hiring decisions have been optimized.

North Branch is fortunate to have such internal talent in the wings for this position. On September 10, I conducted a screening interview with Mr. Nate Sondrol, the current GIS/Parks Director, and he has a strong interest in the position.

Mr. Sondrol has worked for the City of North Branch for 19 years in the current position. He previously was the GIS Analyst for the City of Bismarck, North Dakota. He has a BA in Geography from St. Cloud State University and specialized training in GIS applications. While his current position began as primarily GIS specialist and parks planning, it has expanded over the years into more traditional municipal planning. His education, training, and experience meet the requirements necessary to lead this department.

During the interview, as well as earlier meetings, I determined Mr. Sondrol clearly has exceptional skills in the technical core competencies of the following areas required for this position:

- budgeting and departmental financial management
- supervisory and personnel skills, employee development and training
- large scale project and program management
- strategic planning
- technical skills of municipal planning and land use
- grant-writing and grant administration

Mr. Sondrol also has many personal strengths necessary for this position. First and most importantly, he has a genuine *passion* for this avocation and truly believes in servant leadership, serving the public interest, and getting the job done. He has

excellent communication and interpersonal skills and leads with a pragmatic, strategic, and empathetic style that promotes partnerships and teamwork approaches to tasks and challenges. He is very responsive to the needs of the City Council and City Administrator and is a very reliable resource.

He places a premium value on professionalism and customer service. He listed the department's biggest challenge as responsiveness and turn-around time of applications and requests for service. He believes the department is doing the best it can with its resources but the growth in service demands has caused a lag-time in responsiveness that he believes needs to be improved. He continues to look for means and methods to streamline operations that improve efficiency and effectiveness.

He has excellent visionary skills and sees significant potential for the community in growth and development; and he wants to realize that vision. At the same time, he is well-grounded in realistic expectations. He is enthusiastic about spearheading a comprehensive development effort for the industrial park which he sees as a special project with huge potential for the city's future.

His thought process is obviously strategic, innovative, progressive, and entrepreneurial. He looks for new approaches to old problems and can simultaneously implement a long-term vision while making sure the 'nuts-and-bolt' mechanics of the department are still being accomplished.

He counts among his strengths his communication style, ability to work with 'just about anybody', self-motivation, multi-tasking, and customer service. He suggests his weakness is a tendency to over-extend himself and not always effectively achieving a healthy life-work balance.

Mr. Sondrol is imminently qualified to be a very successful Director of Community Development.

Should he be appointed to the director's position, I suggest he be encouraged to participate in advanced training in economic development by attending trade shows, cultivate relationships with site selectors, conferences addressing economic development financing, business recruitment and retention, etc. The economic development competition among communities is intense and difficult; and it is important for North Branch to stay on the 'cutting edge' instead of the 'bleeding edge' of economic development and growth.

Conclusion

The following is a summary of my recommendations:

- 1) Promote Mr. Nate Sondrol to Director of Community Development and re-write the job description.

- 2) Replace the job title GIS/Parks Director with City Planner, back-fill this position after re-writing the job description, and bring this position into the CD department.
- 3) Transfer the Building Inspections/Code Enforcement department into a division of the Community Development Department with the Building Official being a middle-management position. This would be done at a time when the Building Official position becomes vacant.
- 4) Undertake a long-range service level and staffing plan for the department that properly aligns projected services and service levels with future resources.

END OF REPORT