

Cowley County Community Plan 2006-2010

Introduction

In different ways and in different settings, hundreds of Cowley County residents have spent the last year asking and answering questions about our community:

What do you love about Cowley County? How can we best preserve that? What do you dislike about Cowley County? What are you willing to do to fix it? What do you want Cowley County to be like for our children? For our grandchildren?

Right away, these questions and answers demonstrated that even though this county has its share of challenges, most of our people are optimistic about the days and years ahead. We have also learned that while we will continue to have our differences, we have the capacity and the spirit to focus on what we have in common -- our shared heritage, attachment to community, acknowledgement of our challenges and optimism for our future.

As sponsors of *20/20 Community Visioning*, members of Cowley First have listened to the community. The themes our community widely agrees upon have become the main points of our plan. Many of the community's ideas about how we can achieve our dreams are reflected in the plan's detail. More ideas will surely be discovered along the way.

Cowley First has adopted the following community vision as a collective expression of our hopes and dreams for the year 2020, and as a five-year community plan for mobilizing the people and resources to claim that vision and make it real.

Cowley County Community Vision

From the soothing charm of the Flint Hills to the buzz of commerce and culture in our towns and cities, Cowley County boasts abundant life and attraction. We are rural and small town, but not small in thought and action. We value closeness and connectedness. We see economic and cultural possibilities spreading all across our corner of the Great American Prairie. Education, music, and the arts enrich our lives – lives bound by family, community, and a commitment to opportunity and inclusion. Together, we commit our time and talent to this shared vision for the future of Cowley County:

- **Cowley County is a safe and drug-free place to live, rear children, work and play.**

Neighborhoods, businesses, schools, and law enforcement work together to maintain public safety and keep crime rates low. Parents know their children are safe in schools, neighborhoods, parks and other public spaces. Effective drug and alcohol prevention and treatment programs are readily available. The health and safety of our residents, especially families with children is our top priority.

- **We boast a strong economy with good jobs, lively downtowns and a modern transportation infrastructure to support us.**

Cowley County offers well-paying industrial, manufacturing, and service jobs. We work together to create or seize new business opportunities throughout our region. Our business districts, especially downtowns, are bustling with shops, restaurants, entertainment venues, and service enterprises. We have fully developed the transportation and information networks that support our continued economic growth and development. We nourish our entrepreneurial culture. We actively support agri-tourism in our rural communities. At Strother Field and our other business and industrial areas, we promote the continued success of our existing businesses. Risk-taking entrepreneurs are the life-blood of our vibrant, adaptable, and diversified economy. We enthusiastically welcome and encourage new businesses that contribute to our quality of life.

- **We accomplish many of our goals through creative, forward-thinking public-private partnerships.**

Cooperative planning and investment bring together the many fertile ideas that our business community, our local government leaders, and our other public and private partners have to offer. These partnerships spur progress in many areas. We offer activities for teens and other young people. We address the problems created by poverty, and work to eliminate it. Every willing person, and every child, merits our support as he or she strives for a better life. We preserve our historical buildings and artifacts. We promote a positive image for our communities, based on real achievements and capabilities. Our partnerships also help to fund and promote economic development activities at local, county, and regional levels.

- **Cowley County attracts and retains youth and young families.**

Children and youth are nurtured, mentored and taken seriously, which cements a lifelong tie to Cowley County. Our optimistic and enthusiastic residents promote our family-friendly communities among their own friends and relations. Cowley County's employment opportunities, recreational activities, and competitive cost of living encourage young families to make their homes here.

- **Our schools help each individual develop his or her talents and interests to their fullest potential.**

Our schools help their students achieve the high educational standards the community expects. We support our students and their teachers in word and deed. We assure every student, preschool through adult, has a safe and challenging learning environment. Our schools prepare their students for successful careers, fulfilling lives, and valuable contributions to civic life.

- **Our private and public spaces reflect the pride and creativity of our people.**

Cowley County looks as good as is. Our businesses, neighborhoods and countryside are attractive and well maintained. We accept and share responsibility for the upkeep. Our city and county entrances reflect our rich heritage and our optimism. Our public spaces are clean and inviting.

- **Our community charm and tourism attractions lure visitors.**

Cowley County's communities and countryside have developed unique identities to become favored tourist destinations. Residents rally around these qualities. Together, we promote each of our communities' special brands. Small-town life and prairie living are "in." Our agri-tourism and other ag-based industries are thriving. Our farmers and ranchers are prospering. We welcome visitors and artisans from throughout the world, encouraging them to make Cowley County their home.

- **Cowley County treasures our historic, cultural, financial and human resources.**

We retain local wealth and preserve our natural and historic assets. Cowley County is rich in arts, music and lush parks. Southwestern College and Cowley County Community College are important focal points for cultural and civic events. Our festivals and other cultural attractions can boast of international audience appeal. The people of Cowley County are imaginative, creative and resourceful.

- **All residents have safe, affordable and suitable housing.**

Housing options are plentiful for all income levels and lifestyles. Both public and private entities ensure this need is met.

- **Cowley County is a healthy community blessed with good doctors and other health care professionals.**

We actively pursue every opportunity to enhance our health care capabilities, to attract needed professionals, and to encourage new health care enterprises. Residents are able to choose local providers to meet their health care needs. Families and employers can afford health care and health insurance. We encourage and promote healthy lifestyles.

- **Diversity enriches all of us.**

Every individual is welcomed into civic life and treated fairly. Inclusion guides us. We accept the challenges that diversity in ethnicity, experience, aptitude and thought can present, and we resolve differences in a civil and respectful manner. Our laws and enforcement of them are colorblind and ignorant of wealth and social standing. Our youth are valued and taken seriously. Our seniors are respected and cared for.

This is the future that we, the people of Cowley County, have determined that we will achieve and maintain. Many voices have shared their worries and their dreams in a spirit of hope and trust. To honor those voices we will fund a long-term community development partnership. We will attract others to join with us. We will work together throughout the years to bring this shared vision to life.

Cowley County Community Goals

For purposes of organizing resources and initiating action for the future, our five year plan is organized around five broad community interests: People, Economy, Place, Health and Culture. Strategies in each area are preceded by ideas and concerns we heard from the community. Many strategies in these five areas are closely interrelated, and their implementation will require extensive collaborative action.

Cowley County People

The strategies that follow are intended to contribute to the community's social capital: positive, reciprocal relationships among people. The strategies should empower all community members, increase harmony among racial and ethnic groups, improve opportunities for young children, retain young people in the community, enhance technology skills and nurture community leaders.

Community Concerns

- *Retain youth in the county*
- *Further strengthen and fund public education*
- *Address poverty among children and families*
- *Increase resources for senior services, especially in smaller communities*
- *Address the shortage of child care and early childhood education*
- *Ensure that programs are inclusive and serve all communities in the county*
- *Strengthen cooperation and partnerships among individual communities*

1. Attract and retain young people in the community through increased economic opportunities, appealing housing choices and civic partnerships that make the area more appealing to young people.

Conversations with Cowley County adults often return to a familiar theme: we want our children and grandchildren to live close by. If this desire is to become a reality for many, we must create more and higher-paying jobs and more affordable housing. Ideas for doing so are found in other sections of this plan. Our young people want more than a good paycheck to remain close to home. We also must make far greater efforts to include youth and young adults in community decision-making. It must become second nature to seek their voices and votes as we make choices about everything from recreation to economic development. Regular surveying of younger people to get opinions and spot trends would be a start. We should also create incentives for businesses that target youth as customers and/or owners.

2. Increase available early childhood programs (birth to age 5) and build community awareness about the value of these programs, so as to enable all children in our community to learn, grow and develop their potential.

Research tells us a child's earliest years are the most critical in his or her development and provide the foundation for success in school and in life. All young children and their families deserve the opportunity to succeed, regardless of demographic, geographic or economic conditions. There is alarming evidence that many young

children in Cowley County do not have access to activities that promote optimal development, and as a result, they are entering school developmentally delayed. Promoting and fully funding existing programs is a natural starting point.

3. Build understanding of our diverse cultures through affirmative steps to welcome all residents and include them in public decision-making and community affairs.

In many respects, we are a welcoming community. Some barriers remain to full inclusion of all persons, however. Public services need to be evaluated to ensure that citizens are fully served regardless of language and other barriers. Social barriers should be reduced or eliminated so all residents may contribute to the community's life and enjoy it. When we work together our differences recede, and our common humanity is manifested. Inclusion of diverse cultures and viewpoints captures the true needs of the community and provides for more effective use of community resources. Building an inclusive environment encourages participation in public affairs and community life and makes the community more appealing as a place to live and work.

4. Support and improve public education for all students

The Vision 20/20 survey results showed strong support for public schools. In many respects schools in Cowley County, including those in smaller communities, are outstanding. High-quality educational opportunities are key to retaining and attracting families, industry and business. Those opportunities are also key to the community's success in meeting workforce needs and dealing effectively with poverty, health needs and social problems. The image of our schools should be improved so we can continue to retain and attract managers and workers with a high priority for their children's education.

5. Expand educational opportunities for young people who elect not to attend college, and for young women and gifted students.

Although the percentage of young people in Cowley County who graduate from high school exceeds the state average, our high school graduates often lack technical skills needed to participate in the workforce. High school technical programs continue to expand, but these programs do not always prepare students to enter the workforce successfully. More importantly, technical training programs now in place are not well aligned with the work opportunities available in the county.

Young women seeking to prepare themselves for professional and technical fields need encouragement in a culture that traditionally favored males. Young women's athletic opportunities remain limited compared with those of young men. Educators should take the lead with volunteers and community leaders to improve support for young women in school and athletics. Gifted students are well identified but need more options for expressing their talents. Their success of young women and gifted students is important to the community and its future. Volunteers should work with schools and the community to enrich the opportunities for both these groups.

6. Provide mentoring and leadership to promote diversity, reduce poverty and create a balanced economy.

There must be a change in our mindset to address the complicated issue of poverty. Much of the poverty in the county is generational, requiring interventions that change patterns of behavior but still respect individuals and families. We must also provide employment opportunities and related supports that can prevent individuals from falling below the poverty level. Local leaders, schools and churches should play an active role in the implementation of this strategy. Our efforts should start at the earliest ages and extend support such as mentoring to residents of all ages who want to fulfill their dreams.

7. Improve services for seniors countywide by obtaining increased funding at the local level, countywide.

The elderly population of Cowley County is larger than average and those individuals are living longer. Their contributions to the community have been, and are, great. But many seniors are not well integrated into community life today. Because of their numbers and experience, the community can benefit considerably from their full participation. A number of businesses in the county exist to serve seniors, and those businesses should take a lead in bringing seniors into the mainstream of the community's life. In rural communities seniors may outnumber those who support them. It is vital that federal, state and non-profit funding for seniors be supplemented by locally generated funds on a countywide basis.

Cowley County Economy

The strategies that follow are intended to contribute to sustaining and expanding the county's economic base in ways that support entrepreneurship, business retention, business development, workforce recruiting and development, regional partnerships, wealth retention, tourism promotion and downtown development.

Community Concerns

- *Support home-grown business and industry*
- *Attract new business and industry*
- *Overcome barriers to successful workforce recruiting*
- *Stimulate and support entrepreneurship*
- *Provide incentives to develop more retail businesses*
- *Promote county tourism attractions and agri-tourism*
- *Strengthen regional economic partnerships*
- *Retain local wealth and direct it to future needs*
- *Continue to provide property tax exemptions for new and expanding industry*

8. Secure adequate, long-term funding for the Cowley First Economic Development Partnership

The foundation for effective economic development at the local level is a sustained, multi-year, strategically coordinated effort that has financial investment and active leadership from government, business and nonprofit entities. A cooperative spirit is essential.

The Cowley First Partnership should be strengthened by becoming a public-private partnership that ensures a sustained effort for a minimum of five years, 2007 through 2011. An annual operating budget of \$180,000, committed through 2011, will enable

Cowley First to hire a full-time program director with experience in county-wide priorities including entrepreneurship, business retention and rural development.

Cowley First and other economic development partners in our county should continue to develop closer ties and working relationships with state and regional economic development organizations. This would assist in recruiting jobs and workers and also provide a stronger voice on legislative issues affecting the regional economy.

9. Retain and expand existing industry

We should maintain an environment conducive to the stability and growth of local business and industry. We should develop a long-term strategy to market local business and industry to our residents, both for purposes of sales to consumers and employment of local people. This strategy should include such things as a single database of existing businesses in the county, "shop local" campaigns and business fairs.

10. Overcome barriers to successful workforce recruiting and development, especially in housing, child services and perceptions of quality of life

We need to develop a countywide coalition of vision partners to address the significant barriers to employee recruiting that have been identified by local business and industry managers:

- Lack of affordable housing for hourly and semi-skilled workers
- Lack of daycare 24/7
- Need for technical and skills training tailored to local business and industry
- Perceived image of local schools as having low test scores
- Perceived lack of opportunities for shopping and dining out.
- Drug and alcohol abuse

11. Promote entrepreneurship development through a network of services to stimulate and support startup business ventures

We should enhance the entrepreneurship culture in Cowley County with steps that include:

- **An Entrepreneurship Center.** Cowley First should help create a one-stop support center as part of a network of technical assistance and business counseling to increase the sustainability of new companies. The center should provide hands-on support services equivalent to a virtual incubator. The Cowley College Business, Industry and Entrepreneurship Program should be supplemented by complementary programs such as those at Southwestern College and SCORE's small business counselors. The center should continue to cultivate a culture that encourages entrepreneurs, including students in middle school and high school.
- **A Business Incubator(s).** Cowley First should work with economic development partners such as Winfield Economic Development and Ark City Industries to

provide affordable, leased space to new entrepreneurs for their first two to five years, so they can invest their limited resources to meet other needs.

- **A "One-a-Year" Entrepreneurship Recruitment Program.** In order to supplement other entrepreneurship programs, a nationwide promotion should be undertaken annually to recruit an entrepreneur to start a new business in Cowley County. Business space, technical assistance and venture capital should be provided as necessary. Instead of making grants or loans, Cowley First should take an ownership interest in the new company. Revenue generated should be used to continue the program.
- **A Private For-Profit Venture Capital Corporation.** Cowley First should work with the private sector to stimulate development of a private for-profit venture capital corporation to provide entrepreneurs with working capital loans not available from traditional financial institutions.
- **An Inventor Center.** Cowley First should work with program partners to develop an inventor center that provides technical assistance and business counseling for creative individuals to test their product ideas.

12. Promote rural development through expansion of tourism activities and initiatives in agri-tourism

Our *ABCDE Better Together* rural development program in eastern Cowley County is a Governor's Rural Life Task Force Pilot Project (2006-07) and a national model for sustainable rural development. We should regularly sponsor familiarization tours to create awareness and interest among tourism professionals. Feedback from these tours should help us learn how to entice tourists to "stay a while" in Cowley County. Strategic regional partnerships can help us expand resources and opportunities for success in agri-tourism.

13. Target and recruit new businesses and industries that will create jobs

Cowley First should work with program partners including cities and economic development organizations such as Ark City Industries and Winfield Economic Development to identify and recruit businesses with an emphasis on creating high-quality jobs. Partners in this effort should include regional and state economic development organizations.

14. Expand the number and variety of retail businesses in the county

Cowley First should partner with local chambers of commerce, downtown revitalization groups and other retail interests to develop a strategy to encourage the planned development and start-up of new commercial businesses and broaden the retail base in the county. Two types of businesses mentioned in the Vision 20/20 survey responses, clothing stores, shoe stores and quality restaurants, should have priority.

15. Grow endowments for the purpose of retaining wealth in the community and directing its use to future community needs

Financial resources are critical to economic development. Creating a civic attitude that encourages wealth retention is a key strategy that will enable the region to support and preserve its quality of life for future generations. Working through Legacy, a regional community foundation, we hope to encourage the growth of endowments that will allow us to maintain the rich and viable life we cherish in Cowley County.

Cowley County Place

The strategies that follow address the physical infrastructure and appeal of the community, including affordable, suitable housing, attractive visual appearance, appropriate development of transportation corridors, improvements in public transportation and expansion of air and rail services.

Community Concerns

- *Clean up unsafe properties, trash and junk*
- *Make city entrances more attractive*
- *Provide more affordable housing*
- *Enhance the county's transportation infrastructure*
- *Protect and improve the natural environment*
- *Undertake more long range community planning*

16. Improve the appearance of commercial, residential and public properties, with a priority for those areas first encountered by visitors to the community.

A community's appearance conveys a powerful message about its values, self-image and aspirations. Appearance also markets the community to visitors who form first and often lasting impressions that influence investment decisions. A substantial majority of residents who participated in Vision 20/20 emphasized that the visual quality of the community -- both cities and rural areas -- was a high priority and that we can and must do better. Improvements should be initiated one property owner and one business at a time, with each taking personal responsibility for improving and maintaining its property. Residential and commercial neighbors should engage in joint efforts to raise money and volunteers for improvements local government cannot afford. City and county governments must also step up to the plate with strengthened zoning and nuisance codes, public education and, when necessary, tougher enforcement.

17. Improve and expand the availability of good quality, affordable housing for rental and home ownership.

The present shortage of affordable housing emerged as a priority issue in our focus groups and surveys. The shortage includes single and multi-family housing both for rental and home ownership. The lack of affordable housing impedes the vitality of the community in several ways and acts as a major restraint on individual and family quality of life. The community may also fail to recruit or retain industry due to our housing shortage. Implementing this strategy will require close collaboration among

private developers, investors and public entities, as well as success in obtaining housing grants and related government resources.

18. Begin implementation of a plan for development of the Highway 77 corridor from the north to the south county borders.

Highway 77 is a significant economic, social and cultural artery of Cowley County and its careful, coordinated development is vital to our future. Corridor plans should include not only improvements for safety and traffic flow, but also for sustaining pedestrian-friendly downtowns and commercial and industrial development between Winfield and Arkansas City. We should take a proactive approach to the future development of the corridor, rather than allowing it to develop haphazardly. The more efficient our highway, the farther people will travel to take advantage of employment, retail, tourist and cultural opportunities in our county. Coordination among the cities of Arkansas City and Winfield, the Kansas Department of Transportation and Cowley County will be needed to develop a comprehensive plan.

19. Complete and implement regional and countywide transportation plans.

One of the highest priorities for existing and prospective business enterprises is the ability to efficiently transport raw materials and goods from suppliers and finished products to market. We must have effective and strategic traffic flow through our county, which cannot be achieved in a haphazard manner, but only through long-range planning for the financing and construction of transportation infrastructure. The easier and more efficient it is to travel to and within the county, the more attractive we will be to business and tourism investments.

20. Provide reliable air and rail service for agricultural, commercial and industrial transport needs.

Strother Field, our only public airport, is one of the community's most important assets, and investment in its maintenance and improvement is essential if we are to effectively compete for new business investment. Rail service has long been important to local agricultural producers and manufacturers. Given the growth of rail shipping in the country, we should investigate possible upgrades of local rail connections to ensure we can offer the best and most economical shipping options to local businesses and agricultural producers.

21. Develop and implement countywide public transportation services to address the mobility needs of residents who lack access to a personal automobile.

The ability to access services or participate in community life is almost exclusively dependent on driving a personal automobile. A shortage of public transportation contributes to unemployment, poverty, poor access to health care and general isolation. We need an affordable, coordinated public transportation network to enable non-driving residents to locate and sustain a job, attend college, obtain medical and social services, visit a child's school, contribute volunteer talents, shop for necessities and participate in social activities. A first step should be creation of a profile of our public transportation needs. We should also access resources of the Kansas United We Ride program, an initiative of the governor's office to coordinate and enhance public

transportation for human services. Current area transportation providers and a coalition of faith-based organizations, human service providers and other social service entities could be called upon to offer solutions and implement ideas.

22. Protect and improve the natural environment and natural resources in the Cowley County region.

Cowley County is blessed to have a relatively clean environment. Many of the people who participated in Vision 20/20 focus groups were pleased to live in a community where the air is clean and water plentiful. Citizens from all walks of life value the beautiful prairie and the wonders of our lakes, streams and rivers. It is critical that the unspoiled quality of our land and a continuing supply of potable water be preserved for the future.

Cowley County Health

The strategies that follow are intended to promote the physical and mental health of people of all ages who live and work in the county. The strategies include preventing disease and disability, improving access to quality, full service health care and reducing substance abuse.

Community Concerns

- *Address the drug abuse problem*
- *Expand substance abuse prevention*
- *Improve the availability of affordable health care*
- *Provide and encourage more recreation opportunities for young people*
- *Reduce child abuse*

23. Reduce drug and alcohol abuse among youth and adults in Cowley County through strengthened prevention initiatives, expanded mentoring opportunities and aggressive law enforcement and judicial responses to offenders.

Substance abuse was rated as one of the top three issues by residents in the Vision 20/20 survey. The community's message is clear: we must act to reduce the effects of this corrosive problem. We should communicate the devastating consequences of substance abuse to individuals, families and communities. The message should be delivered through multiple channels. Mentorship programs should be expanded to give young people positive role models, and these programs should be coordinated with schools.

We must also aggressively enforce the law and prosecute crimes and repeat offenders so that, real consequences for substance abuse are experienced by youth and their responsible adult parties. Enforcement standards must be consistently met. Consequences should include mandatory attendance at an alcohol and drug safety program which may reduce the probability of future substance abuse. If repeat offenses occur, consequences should be considered that include probation for the youth and jail for the responsible party.

24. Offset the attraction to alcohol and illegal drugs by expanding recreation and other programs for young people and adults.

Drug and alcohol-free activities should be organized around age groups, with a high priority placed on after-school and summer programs for youth. Programs should have youth appeal, e. g., they must be seen as creative, positive and fun from the point of view of young people, and must be marketed with this message. Programs should target development of interpersonal skills, skills for coping with stress and peer pressure, problem-solving and decision-making. Adult programs should offer parenting instruction, including ways to promote healthy life choices for all members of the family. Additional education programs should be made available for doctors and other medical professionals.

25. Promote the physical and mental health of residents through expansion of public facilities and programs to encourage, walking, jogging, biking and community gardening.

Cardiovascular disease is the leading health problem in Cowley County. Low-cost family activities that increase cardiovascular health offer significant prevention benefits. We envision a public trail along Timber Creek similar to the Greenway in Arkansas City, and monthly "Walk-a-Mile" events sponsored by local churches. Those events could end with a meal at a host church to promote proper eating, family togetherness and community inclusion. We should also create community gardens in rural and urban areas of the county to encourage healthy eating, family fitness and community interaction.

26. Establish accessible free or low-cost medical clinics in Winfield and Arkansas City.

Such successful clinics would require close coordination among local governments and area medical professionals. Grant and foundation funds would be needed. Clinic services should be available to all county residents, including those who lack health insurance. Expanded clinic hours will be necessary to serve residents who work second and third shifts. Clinic facilities should be fully accessible to those with physical disabilities.

27. Increase access to health insurance in Cowley County

Far too many Cowley County residents lack adequate health insurance coverage and as a consequence, lack adequate health care. In many cases these individuals are fully employed, but their employers do not offer a health insurance benefit. We simply cannot realize our community vision when so many of our neighbors lack access to basic health care. While solutions to the nation's health care crisis are beyond the reach of our individual communities, we can and must do a better job of informing our residents of the federal and state programs that extend affordable health care coverage to those who are without private insurance.

28. Increase the number of healthcare professionals in Cowley County.

Our emphasis should be on growing our own healthcare professionals. In addition to their current activities in this area, local medical providers should join in a community-based Health Careers program to promote health-related vocations in high schools. We should invite local health-related businesses to provide scholarships and internships for students who pursue careers in health care at Cowley and Southwestern Colleges, and encourage the students involved to pursue their health care careers locally. The medical training resources at our local colleges are a significant asset and we should do all we can to sustain and expand them.

29. Undertake a public education campaign for a countywide tobacco free environment in public spaces and the elimination of youth access to tobacco products.

Prevention of disease through a reduction in tobacco use and second-hand smoke is a measure that promises significant improvement in the health of Cowley County residents. We should form a coalition to advocate that restaurants and other public spaces be free from second-hand smoke. Grants from the Kansas Health Foundation and other nonprofit organizations should be sought to underwrite the campaign. We note with gratitude that use of tobacco among teenagers in Cowley County has declined over the past five years, and we need to keep that trend line moving downward. Our campaign must also encourage retailers who sell tobacco products to increase their vigilance in preventing sales to minors. For retailers who fail to take appropriate measures, we should advocate strict punishment, including fines.

30. Reduce the historically high incidence of confirmed child abuse in Cowley County.

Analysis of data from the state Dept. of Social and Rehabilitation Services shows a high, if declining, incidence of substantiated child abuse in Cowley County. In 2005 the rate was 16.8 children per 1,000, according to the Kids Count Data Book. The state average was 10.1. Teachers, health care personnel, law enforcement, SRS and organizations like Safe Homes and CASA are on the front line when it comes to responding to spouse and child abuse. They need strong leadership and support from the community. We should no longer accept the high incidence of child abuse and neglect in Cowley County. We should change our mindset and take a proactive approach to overcoming this devastating social ill that diminishes the quality of all our lives.

31. Reduce the health threat from childhood obesity through school programs that increase physical activity and promote healthy nutrition choices.

Obesity in children is a critical and increasingly widespread problem in Cowley County and our nation. Its consequences threaten health in profound ways at all stages of life. Cowley County schools will soon be under a federal mandate to develop a wellness program for students, but we propose getting ahead of that curve. Parents and others in the community should volunteer to assist the schools in offering expanded physical fitness activities during the school day, increasing nutrition education and providing healthy snack foods and beverages in school vending machines.

32. Protect the quality of our air and water, and continue to provide adequate quantities of water for Cowley County.

Many of the people who participated in Vision 20/20 focus groups were pleased to live in a community where the air is clean and water plentiful. Still stream biologists and the federal Environmental Protection Agency tell us there are threats to the quality of our air and water. We should seek the fullest cooperation possible to keep our air clean and assure quality water resources for domestic and industrial use. We should work with groups like river basin committees and the Grouse-Silver Creek Watershed organization, which have partnerships with state and federal agencies to preserve water flow and quality. And we should work with industry and agricultural interests to assure clean air for the future.

Cowley County Culture

The strategies that follow are intended to preserve and develop the community's creativity and cultural life, including the visual arts, theater, music and community festivals, and promote the preservation of historic structures.

Community Concerns

- *Preserve and promote historic landmarks and structures in the county*
- *Strengthen downtown revitalization*
- *Preserve the natural beauty of rural Cowley County*
- *Promote the humanities, including music festivals, theater and performing arts*

33. Develop pedestrian-friendly downtowns for day and evening activities to offer leisure and tourist opportunities for all ages.

Many communities in Cowley County have a core infrastructure of buildings and public facilities that provide opportunities for restoration and possibly reinvention of their downtown areas. Toward this end we should begin by analyzing local, state and federal regulations. We should advocate for changes that make our downtowns genuine destinations for residents and tourists, with special emphasis on congregating unique businesses that cannot be found at shopping malls or discount stores -- galleries, coffee bars, boutiques, eateries, farmers' markets and entertainment for day and evening hours. We must also insure that the plan for Highway 77 corridor development is compatible with the vision to make our downtowns friendly to pedestrians and tourists.

34. Showcase Cowley County's history, architecture, waterways and other natural spaces in order to expand leisure activities for residents and tourists.

Cowley County residents often take for granted our tremendous natural and physical assets and their appeal to others. For example, in the new publication of "The Kansas Guidebook for Explorers" by Marci Penner over 70 specific historic and architectural sites, museums, events, natural areas and other attractions are showcased for Cowley County. We should use our rich history and features unique to Cowley County to

promote our area to residents and visitors, and also to provide a backdrop to our own cultural life.

35. Encourage diverse local cultural festivals and celebrations, leisure activities and sports.

We need to build upon and take advantage of Cowley County's already well-earned national reputation as a music festival destination. We should support existing festivals and facilitate additional community celebrations that will broaden our cultural life experiences, stimulate creativity -- and we might add -- enrich our local economy. Sports events in particular appeal to both residents and visitors and give Cowley County its reputation for hospitality in this area.

36. Develop a Cowley County cultural life center to promote collaboration among cultural arts organizations and enrich the cultural life of the community.

As a result of our local colleges and community heritage we are extraordinarily rich in cultural arts for a community of our size. We could be even richer through greater collaboration among artists, cultural advocates and institutions. A county cultural life center would provide impetus for a myriad of collaborative efforts among individuals and organizations that contribute to the cultural vitality of our community. For example, the center could host quarterly round table meetings with representation from all towns and rural areas in the county. Another center program could be developed to publish an arts and humanities directory, both in print and online. We believe we could assemble the resources to build and operate the center through grants and other funding sources.

37. Develop and begin implementation of a countywide plan for marketing cultural arts.

This plan will promote the community's creativity and diverse cultural life to our internal market -- Cowley County residents -- as well as to visitors. Our cultural arts events and programs should be marketed throughout the region, building upon our reputation and existing marketing efforts. We believe a dedicated staff position will be needed to implement the marketing plan, measure progress and champion Cowley County.

Next Steps – A postscript

Our Vision 20/20 Task Force recognizes that these strategy statements call out for more detail: measurable objectives, plans of action, assessment methodology, responsible parties and completion dates. In some program areas, the leaders and partners are already in place. They'll not be, nor should they be, held back. For other strategies, the "how" is less clear. Naturally, priorities will have to be set.

The members of the Vision 20/20 Task Force have been privileged to work on this document. We sense that history is being made, and we hope that our purposeful attempts to include many voices in the planning will lead to many voices being part of the activity to come.